# “The Great *Hesed* That Has Fallen to the Depths of the *Kelipot*, God Save Us”: The Discourse of Awe in the Traditions Recorded in the Name of the Baal Shem Tov in *Sefer Degel Mahaneh Ephraim*: A Distant Reading Leading to a Close Reading

Israel Baal Shem Tov (the BeShT) (1700~-1760), the legendary figure who is regarded as the founder of the Hasidic movement, has been the focus of endless academic and non-academic scholarship.[[1]](#footnote-1) Since he left almost no writings behind, the oral traditions passed down in his name by his students, though problematic, are virtually the only source by which we can characterize his innovations. While one can attempt to uncover his original message from these traditions, from a historical perspective, it is more important and feasible to examine the doctrines attributed to him by his successors. This study will be the first to demonstrate the potential contribution of computational tools for the distant reading of textual features and ideas in the field of Hasidism. These statistical tools will help to reveal the singular characteristics of the reported teachings of the BeShT, while distinguishing them from the textual corpus into which they were integrated. This study is also unique in that, for the first time, it applies a methodical combination of distant and close reading to the study of Hasidism and demonstrates how distant reading can direct a close reading of the text. While distant reading makes use of statistical computational tools and thus allows the analysis of large chunks of text,[[2]](#footnote-2) close reading seeks to interpret findings by placing them within a research discourse, a conceptual context. In this article, I will apply a combination of mechanical reading methods, which incorporate the classification and quantification of textual patterns, and the hermeneutic act, the cultural practice that allows communication between human beings through its symbols.[[3]](#footnote-3) I will also show that even in relatively small corpora such as a single book, quantitative tools are effective in noting general linguistic and textual trends.

A central premise that underlies the present study, based on a cornerstone of modern hermeneutics, is that each student has a different teacher, i.e., the BeShT is different in the writings of each of his students.[[4]](#footnote-4) This premise requires us to analyze the imprint of each student on the traditions he cites in the name of his teacher. This can be done through the following steps: A. An examination of all the teachings attributed to the BeShT in the writings of a particular student as compared to the student’s own writing – that is, the work of the student in which the teachings in the name of the BeShT are presented. This step can help us to measure the degree of similarity between the concepts attributed to the master and the words of the student himself. B. Another step is to compare the collected teachings from among all the students and identify the commonalities and distinctions between them.

While digital humanities research has progressed by leaps and bounds in the last decade, most of the progress in Jewish studies has found expression in the creation of literary and historical databases accessible to the general public.[[5]](#footnote-5) There are only a few research projects in Jewish studies that use analytical tools for the analysis of these databases – quantitative analyses that allow for cultural, literary, and other forms of analysis – let alone to interpret texts. Most of the use of these tools in the field of Hasidism thus far has focused on the geographical-demographic aspect.[[6]](#footnote-6) Marcin Wodziński has led pioneering advances in Big Data research and distance reading in the academic study of Hasidism, specifically in his temporal-geographical study *Historical Atlas of Hasidism*.[[7]](#footnote-7) In addition, he used Big Data tools to analyze the spread of Hasidic groups through Europe and drew conclusions from the use of these tools about the power relations and leadership models of Hasidism.[[8]](#footnote-8) He also demonstrated how quantitative tools can be used to characterize trends in the reportage of Hasidism in the press of the Maskilim.[[9]](#footnote-9) Despite these important steps, which revealed the potential of historical research conducted using the analytical tools of Big Data, quantitative tools have not yet been used, as far as I know, for the interpretive reading of Hasidic texts, or for the identification of conceptual tendencies in the texts.

The test case I will use is *Sefer Degel Mahaneh Ephraim*, written by the grandson of the BeShT, R. Moshe Haim Ephraim of Sudylkow (hereafter Ephraim of Sudylkow or the author of the *Degel*).[[10]](#footnote-10) Ephraim of Sudylkow was born in Medzhybizh to Udel (or Odel), the daughter of Hannah (sister of R. Gershon of Kitov) and Yehiel Michel Ashkenazi, the grandson of the BeShT. Ephraim's year of birth is unclear, but he was probably already of marrying age (perhaps already married) when the BeShT.[[11]](#footnote-11) Ephraim’s son, Rabbi Yaakov Yehiel of Koritz, published his book *Degel Mahaneh Ephraim* in Koretz in 1810, about twenty years after the death of Ephraim of Sudylkow.[[12]](#footnote-12) This book was published about thirty years after the first printed Hasidic book to include teachings of the BeShT, *Toldot Yaakov Yosef* was published in Koretz in 1780. Rabbi Moshe Ephraim was still alive at the publication of *Toldot Yaakov Yosef*, and some of its content was incorporated into his book *Degel Mahaneh Ephraim.* Of the dozens of teachings that R. Moshe Ephraim cites in the name of his grandfather, it is clear that some of them were not heard personally but are quoted from the writings of Rabbi Yaakov Yosef of Połonne, author of *Toldot Yaakov Yosef*. As highlighted by Chaim Elly Moseson, there is evidence that the *Degel Mahaneh Ephraim* was written by Ephraim himself.[[13]](#footnote-13) Moseson suggests that some of the teachings it presents may not have been heard directly, but were taken from manuscripts distributed by the Maggid’s circle in the 1780s and 1790s.[[14]](#footnote-14) He did not, however, show evidence for this suggestion by comparing the teachings or by showing similarities between the teachings as they appear in the *Degel* and these manuscripts. Extensive research has not yet been done on all the teachings of the BeShT presented in the *Degel*⸺such as comparing them with the writings of R. Yaakov Yosef or examining them in light of the sermons of R. Moshe Ephraim himself. Further, *Degel Mahaneh Ephraim* has not yet been examined as an exegetical whole in terms of its ideological, stylistic, and literary aspects, although various aspects of R. Ephraim’s thought have been discussed individually.[[15]](#footnote-15) As a rule, none of the BeShT’s students have yet been subject to a comprehensive study that systematically compares the traditions transmitted by the student in the BeShT’s name with that student’s corpus of independent writing. Ephraim of Sudylkow quoted about two hundred teachings of the BeShT, referring to the BeSht’s words as a source of authority and positioning them as a preliminary text into which he interweaves his own commentary, to the extent that there is no clear distinction or boundary between the BeShT’s statements and the *Degel*’s interpretation of him. Thus, in creating a corpus of teachings, interpretive decisions had to be made.

An examination of the corpus using the tools of distant reading allows us to compare the characteristics of the teachings in the name of the BeShT with the teachings of *Degel Mahaneh Ephraim* as a composition with its own independent exegetical techniques. The digital tools make it possible to produce a corpus usage lexicon with which we can find the relative weight of the various dominant concepts, then examine the degree of lexical structural similarity between them. The novelty of this study is the effort to separate the teachings of the BeShT from the statements of the transmitters of those teachings – the students of the BeShT – in order to examine to what extent the quotations are shaped and filtered according to the linguistic and theoretical character of the transmitter’s writings, and to what extent they represent a distinct tradition within the transmitter’s works. The present study completes the first step of this labor and examines the totality of the BeShT’s teachings within the *Degel* as compared to the the *Degel* with these teachings excluded. In addition to conclusions about the nature of and relations between the texts that have been derived at the level of distant reading, these findings also present a map or guidelines for a close reading that will decipher the initial results. The study identifies a cluster of several unusually dominant words that represent the distinction between the BeShT tradition and its adaptations; we will devote particular attention to these topics. This article will touch on a number of paragraphs that include the prominent words and repeated expressions that have been identified in the distant reading as marking a striking distinction between the corpora. With the help of these findings, I will show the centrality of fear of sin (*yirat hahet*), fear (*pahad*), and ascetic tendencies in traditions in the name of the BeShT within the *Degel Mahaneh Ephraim*, and, by contrast, their absence in the rest of the *Degel* once those traditions have been excluded.

# Literature Review on the BeShT and *Sefer Degel Mahaneh Ephraim*

Tsippi Kauffman has analyzed the theological teachings of Ephraim of Sudylkow as a whole, covering the basic concepts of immanence, determinism, divine service in the material world, unification, prayer, and others. Her discussion comes in the context of a full study comparing the the positions of the BeShT’s students.[[16]](#footnote-16) Another step forward in this line of research, acknowledging the bias of each student and their contribution to shaping the tradition of the BeShT, was taken by Iris Brown, in an examination of the parable of the Walls transmitted in the name of the BeShT.[[17]](#footnote-17) In a detailed discussion of the *Degel*, Moshe Idel emphasized the oral aspect of the common pronunciation of the Torah in the traditions from the BeShT. The singular magical power attributed to the Torah is represented in the act of emanation, which brings down not only divine abundance, as is customary in kabbalistic writings, but the divine itself. The physical performance of Torah study has a healing and reviving magical power.[[18]](#footnote-18) However, he saw this model, which he calls the hermetic-vocal, as an early stage in the spiritual development of the BeShT, which was subsequently minimized – although not completely abandoned – in favor of a more neo-platonic model emphasizing noetic aspects. Idel understood the teachings found in the *Degel* to represent a later stage in the thought of the BeShT than those transmitted by Rabbi Yaakov Yosef of Połonne.[[19]](#footnote-19)

The most important step towards a comparative examination of the traditions from the BeShT and the positions of Ephraim of Sudylkow himself in the *Degel* was made by Alan Brill. Brill proposed a distinction between Ephraim’s perception of the BeShT’s healing powers and his own.[[20]](#footnote-20) While the BeShT is perceived as a shamanic healer, Ephraim sees himself as one who heals through his connection to the inner life force of the world – through an ascetic life, and through a connection to rabbinic practices.[[21]](#footnote-21) While the *Degel* attributes healing powers, charms, and the manipulation of divine names to the BeShT, he himself does not discuss natural cures and maintains that healing through faith is sufficient to render kabbalistic charms superfluous. In addition, one of the main corrections Brill proposed to the scholarship on the emergence of Hasidism, which we will address in more detail below, relates to the attitude towards asceticism and the role of fear in the service of God in the *Degel*. Brill stressed that the picture that emerges from the *Degel* is inconsistent with the romantic picture that Buber painted of the affirmation of reality in early Hasidism. Cleaving to the *Shekhinah*, the spiritual study of the Torah, and the observance of commandments stand in tension and contradiction with lustfulness; the purpose of divine service, through fear, is to transcend bodily pleasures.[[22]](#footnote-22) The analysis below will strengthen this claim but will focus on examining these positions as presented in the teachings of the BeShT that appear in *Degel Mahaneh Ephraim*.

# Method

The purpose of the study is to examine the connections between the traditions from the BeShT within *Degel Mahaneh Ephraim* and the *Degel*’s own teachings. This step begins with a distant reading of the teachings that highlights several differences between the master and the student; I devote a textual discussion, a close reading, to these differences. We will examine to what extent the texts in the name of the BeShT fit with the text of the *Degel*, and at which points they deviate or represent a unique, different voice. This examination relies on the statistical distant reading method, which locates the common words and the repeated expressions in corpora. This study required the “harvesting” of the traditions in the name of the BeShT from *Sefer Degel Mahaneh Ephraim*. “Harvesting” is the name I have coined for the act of cutting out quotations from a larger book, an action that aims to isolate a collection of quotations from a particular source and set it apart from the original text. Given the current capacity of the software for working with Hebrew, this action cannot be performed optimally by a computer; therefore, it was done manually. In the context of BeShT research, this action is necessary in order to distinguish systematically between the words of the BeShT and those of his students and serves as a basis on which to present a portrait of the BeShT through the eyes of his students while identifying the similarities and the differences between the portraits. In his book *Shamati miMori – Osef Hashmuot meShem haBesht* [I Heard from My Teacher: The Collection of Teachings in the Name of the BeShT], Oz Bluman made a first and extensive attempt to harvest and present all the teachings in the name of the BeShT that appear in the writings of his students. Bluman's book helped prepare the corpus of the present study, but the corpus was corrected and completed through a comparison of the teachings he identified to the originals in *Degel Mahaneh Ephraim*. In addition to adding to the corpus a number of teachings that were overlooked, probably in error, by Bluman, I made other decisions with regard to the harvesting operation. The most significant part of this effort was to set the boundaries of the BeShT’s teaching in the text, a task that requires deliberation and, ultimately, a choice. This research has favored a strict and narrow approach, using the most stringent possible boundaries to delineate a teaching of the BeShT, so that wherever there was a doubt whether a certain statement was made by the *Degel*’s author or a teaching attributed to the BeShT, I have ruled that it was added by R. Moshe Ephraim. I performed a harvesting operation that created two separate corpora: A. Teachings ascribed to the BeShT in the *Degel*; B*. Degel Mahaneh Ephraim* without the BeShT’s teachings. A statistical analysis was performed on each of the corpora using Voyant software, and “stop” words were cleared. Stop words included various conjunctions or other words that lack clear semantic value. Due to the limits of the software in working with Hebrew, manual testing work was required to check the frequency of inflected words.

The distant reading performed in this corpus included two main tests performed on the two corpora separately (the teachings of the BeShT, and *Degel* without the teachings of the BeShT), and a statistical test comparing them: A. A verbal density test in which the software calculates the number of unique words in the entire corpus. Higher verbal density actually means more limited vocabulary. B. Dominant words, listed in descending order of frequency. The Appendix presents this list of words after the removal of the stop words. The assumption is that the words with the highest frequency represent central themes in the literary corpus. C. In order to compare the corpora, the lists of words from each of the corpora were examined against each other, and the level of significant difference in the frequencies of each word was examined using a Pearson's chi-squared test chi test to determine the quality of the match between the corpora.

In addition, for the purpose of examining and locating sections for close reading, another distant reading tool was used – the identification of repeated expressions. The computerized system produced a list of frequent combinations in corpora. By categorical division and topic modeling, I identified a cluster of several expressions that represent the text’s treatment of the topics of evil and revelation.

# Presentation of findings

From the two lists of dominant words, and from examining the differences in frequency between them, I found that the two corpora share many similarities. I learned that out of the 40 most dominant words with semantic value in each corpus, a match was found with respect to 25 words (i.e., 62.5 percent similarity). This resemblance reinforces the credibility of the test, as well as the reasonable assumption that the master’s quotations will be fundamentally similar to the language and exegetical orientation of the student. In addition, these similarities suggest that many issues are dominant in both corpora, although their order or hierarchy varies from one corpus to the other. The differences between these corpora call for interpretation and content analysis. The following emerged as themes shared by the two corpora in their lists of the 20 most dominant words: names for God, person (*adam*), Torah, letters (*otiot*), the world (*haolam*), righteous (*tzaddik*), king (*melekh*), fear/awe (*yir’ah*), uniqueness (*yihud*), light (*or*), *Shekhinah*, and Israel. However, although these all appear in both, there is a significant difference in their level of prevalence. For example, names for God are the most common in *Degel Mahaneh Ephraim* at 0.0176, a much higher figure (p <0.001) than their appearance in traditions from the BeShT – although even in the BeShT these names appear very frequently, second in the list of most dominant words (with a frequency of 0.011). The word “*adam*” [person] is first in the list drawn from the BeShT’s teachings (with a frequency of 0.0115), whereas in the *Degel* it is fifth in the list (with a frequency of 0.0045), where the difference in this frequency is very significant (p <0.001). This list shows that the *Degel* has continued the central, foundational elements which it presents as traditions received from the author’s grandfather, either directly from the BeShT or passed down by the Baal haToledot (Yaakov Yosef). Although the traditions cited in the Degel from the BeShT represent a separate tradition from the author’s own teachings, the book largely speaks in a homogeneous voice. This list also reinforces some of the intuitions and themes that scholars have suggested as representative of the BeShT’s teachings in the eyes of his students. However, there are some differences in the relative frequencies of the dominant words, and these differences can serve as a platform for further research into their significance. An interpretive analysis that compares the frequency of words in these corpora would go beyond the scope of a single article. In order to analyze the layers of teachings unique to the BeShT in comparison to the corpus of the *Degel*, I chose to focus on two clusters in which not only is there a disparity in frequencies between the corpora, but there is an even more significant difference: words that are very common in the BeShT, but are absent from the list of dominant words in the *Degel*. I will focus on the analysis of the thematic clusters typical of the BeShT.

The dominant words have been grouped into topic modeling content clusters, and it appears that the traditions in the name of the BeShT include two unique clusters. The more prominent cluster –which contains more words and whose words show higher frequency – includes words related to evil, such as: awe/fear (*yir’ah*), strange/foreign (*zarah/zarut*), husks (*kelipot*), evil (*ro‘a*), sin (*het*), urge (*yetzer*), and sorrow (*tza‘ar*), where the first two stand out distinctly in the BeShT. Next to it is another unique cluster, this time related to revelation (proclamation [*keruz*], voice [*kol*]), which also has a significant presence in the BeShT traditions. The difference in prevalence of the word ‘foreign’ [*zarah*] is dramatic: while it appears twentieth in the list of dominant words (with a frequency of 0.002) in the BeShT, when these are removed it occurs only twenty-five times in the entire *Degel*, almost zero incidences (0.0001) in a chi-squared test (p = 0.0001)! Similarly, the word “evil” [*ro‘a*] is also prominent in the Besht (0.0031), but is not prominent at all in the *Degel*, with the difference in statistical significance p=0.0001. In the “awe/fear” cluster, it should be noted that the word “awe/fear” (*yir’ah*) is more prominent in the BeShT traditions (0.0027) than in the *Degel* itself (0.002), but the difference is not significant. Additionally, other words that represent the treatment of the fear of sin are common to the two corpora without a significant disparity in their dominance between the two lists. These include two expressions ‘God save us’ [*Rahmanah letzlan*] and ‘God forbid’ [*Has veshalom*] (which reinforce the horror and danger of iniquity) and the terms “sin” [*het*] and “husks” [*kelipot*], which represent the texts’ treatment of the demonic and evil aspects of reality.

Except for the examination of singular words, when we examine the recurring phrases and their categorization according to topic modeling, the two corpora show repeated expressions concerning the fear of sin. The phrases *Rahmanah letzlan* and *Has veshalom* are also included in this thematic web, as they warn of the destruction and the danger incumbent in sin. I will not present all the clusters of phrases; rather, I will show only those in the sin-fearing cluster appearing in the corpus of sayings attributed to the BeSht, which I will focus on later. These phrases will serve me as a guide in the close reading:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| The BeShT in Degel Mahaneh Ephraim | Translation | # of appearances |
| חלילה וחס, ח"ו | God forbid | 22 |
| רחמנא ליצלן  | God save us | 11 |
| אזי עובד אלהים אחרים יחשב | Then he will be considered a servant of other gods | 2 |
| אשרי אדם לא יחשוב ה' לו עון | Happy is the person whom God does hold responsible for sin | 2 |
| נקרא קברות התאוה כי כשאדם | called *Kivrot Hataavah* [the Tombs of Lust] for when a person | 2 |
| מחמת חטאיו | Because of his sins | 2 |
| ירא ובוש | Fearful and ashamed | 2 |
| יראת ה' | Fear/awe of God | 2 |
| סור מרע ועשה טוב | Depart from evil and do go | 2 |
| ואז יתפרדו כל פועלי און | And then all evildoers will be scattered | 2 |
| היצר הרע | The evil inclination | 2 |

# Conclusions

The similarity between each corpus’s list of dominant words suggests that most of the BeShT’s teachings are consistent with the writing of the *Degel*, and that there is a high correlation between content and language. This finding can be interpreted as showing that the *Degel’s* author presents the teachings as a means to support his own statements, or, viewed from another angle, that he sees himself as a conduit for the transmission of the teachings of the BeShT. However, the high frequency words in the BeShT’s teachings that are absent from the list of dominant words in the *Degel* may be used to locate the unusual sites where the BeShT’s tradition differs from that of the *Degel*. These words belong to fear/awe [*yir’ah*] cluster as well as the revelation cluster. As we have seen, apart from the fact that the word *yir’ah* is more dominant in the Besht, the words evil [*ro’a*], strange/foreign [*zarut/zarah*], husks [*kelipot*], sin [*het*], inclination [*yetzer*], sorrow [*tza‘ar*] and their inflections appear with high frequency in teachings from the Besht but not in the *Degel*. This data indicates that the *Degel* limits his treatment of evil and of immanent revelation to traditions in the name of the BeShT, and refrains from engaging independently with those topics. This analysis of the dominant words sheds new light on the relationship between the BeShT traditions and the *Degel* itself, as well as the unique prominence of the treatment of evil in the BeShT. These findings demand interpretation: Why are the subjects of evil and revelation limited to traditions in the name of the BeShT, and why did the *Degel* refrain from clear engagement with them in his own writing?

The unusual prominence of concepts like judgments, evil, and sin is related to the prominence of the concept of “tempering the divine judgments” (*hamtakat hadinim*), which arises in the rituals of unifications, the BeShT rephrased [[23]](#footnote-23) The emphasis is on the tempering and repair (*tikkun*) of the judgments, rather than a mystical-quietist approach. This is in line with Elliott Wolfson's claim that the traditions presented in the name of the BeShT on wandering and walking tend to deal with soteriology and draw from the Lurianic heritage, as opposed to the emphasis on *devekut* (mystical union) found in his students’ writings but never brought in his name.[[24]](#footnote-24) Yet another central idea is revealed by the comparison: the moral component of the discussion of evil and sin, which makes use of emotional rhetoric to inspire repair. Various scholars have emphasized the emotional aspects of Hasidism, but the role of the emotions of awe and fear in Hasidic moral discourse has hardly been discussed.[[25]](#footnote-25) On the contrary, the discourse of awe is perceived as antithetical to the image of early Hasidism, which is perceived as sanctifying the eros, joy, and sweetening of divine judgment. Kauffman has claimed that Ephraim of Sudylkow marginalized the idea of *aveirah lishmah* [transgression for the sake (of Heaven)], an idea with its origins in the BeShT, as it arises from R. Yaakov Yosef of Polonne, Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl, and the Maggid of Mezeritch.[[26]](#footnote-26) In this respect, the analysis below has the effect of confirming Kauffman’s claim and reevaluating the nomistic tendencies of the BeShT. In doing so, I will highlight the complex picture in the teachings from the BeShT quoted by the *Degel*, wherein fear and dread play a central religious and rhetorical role.

# A Close Reading of the Dominant Phrases and Words

Since the findings regarding the frequencies point to a significant point of distinction between the BeShT and *Degel* traditions on the subject of evil, we will proceed to a closer reading of the passages concerning these themes. First, I would like to distinguish between moral evil, an elective act considered a sin or transgression, and evil associated with suffering, sorrow, or anguish, which is a condition imposed upon a person from the outside. These two sides of evil are extensively discussed in statements from the BeShT, and both are accompanied by the averting interjections “*Has veshalom*!” or “*Rahmanah letzlan*” which mark them as a potential minefield. Admittedly, the core root of sin is related to a defect of the mind, the impairment of mental devotion to God, as shown in the analyses found in the existing scholarship. However, while the discussions so far in the literature have highlighted the antinomistic side of this devotion, and even the positive attitude towards desire and foreign thoughts as arising from a positive root and the supreme divine source,[[27]](#footnote-27) a close reading of the passages in question points in a different direction, in light of the statistical prominence of the word *yir’ah* (awe/fear).[[28]](#footnote-28)

In addition, I would like to distinguish between two separate functions of *yir’ah*, which have in common a fear of danger: The first has moral characteristics and signifies a moral reaction against the evil deed; it is a discourse that actively participates in the rhetoric of anxiety as a driving force to arouse awe in the hearers. The second deals with the encounter of the *tzaddik* himself with revelation, as well as the fear of the dangers involved. The function of *yir’ah* in Jewish esoteric traditions has been discussed but not yet exhaustively analyzed, and there is something of a novelty in identifying its centrality in traditions from the BeShT, both in sketching a clear image of the BeShT as he appeared in the eyes of one of his senior students – his beloved grandson – and in understanding the vital role of *yir’ah* in Jewish esoteric traditions.[[29]](#footnote-29) Without entering into phenomenological discussions in the following, we will examine the “emotional bundle” of *yir’ah* in its different shades. In using the term “emotional bundle,” I mean that *yir’ah* includes or touches on a number of related emotions – fear of danger, awe before the sublime, and more – and it does not signify just one emotion. In the analysis of the emotional bundle, I will pay special attention to exposing the vocabulary of this bundle and its literary expression.

The remarks of Saba Mahamood, who explored the role of awe in contemporary Islamic culture, are also relevant in our context, and will serve me as a starting point: “I want to attend to the specific texture of these emotions — in particular, fear — and to understand how they came to be constituted as motives for, and modalities of, pious conduct in the realization of a virtuous life.”[[30]](#footnote-30)

According to this approach, it is not only positive emotions like love, joy, and pleasure that are productive in religious service; emotions with a seemingly negative charge can also have a constitutive and positive role. Also, although these texts place awe of the exalted – which in the context of religious phenomenology means something close to the numinous experience described by Otto – as an ideal fear in the hierarchy of religious service, the feelings of fear and awe I will discuss are rather expressed in texts that are ostensibly designed to encourage the reader or hearer to fear sin, to tremble at the desecration of the divine in his negative acts.[[31]](#footnote-31) The discussion of the discourse of *yir’ah* in the beginnings of Hasidism is important not only because of its role in understanding the phenomenology of Hasidism in the context of religious studies, but also because the distant reading reveals it to be a unique feature of the traditions from the BeShT, all the more striking because of its less frequent use in the discourse of his student. I will direct the analysis of the discourse of *yir’ah* using the statistical tools; I will point out the dominant words and repetitive expressions that characterize the *yir’ah* discourse in the BeShT traditions. In the textual analysis, I seek to discover the semantic space and grammar of this discourse and to examine their role in guiding the hearer towards the fulfillment of the Hasidic ethos and way of life.

# “God forbid!” and the rhetoric of fear

The process of elevating “foreign” thoughts and corrupted virtues hinges precisely on the negative moral feelings of *yir’ah* – trembling and awe. The teachings of the BeShT often evoke “frightening” images taken from the *mussar* (ethics) literature, with some creative and original developments. Some of the parables, along with the rhetoric of the warnings, refer to the evil inclination (*yetzer hara*) in the classical, negative sense as an entity that steals and kills the human soul. They relate to the separation between God and the *Shekhinah* (Divine Presence) as the cause of all wars and evils in the world, and so forth. The places where the BeShT emphasizes that desire at its root, has a lofty source have caused the BeShT to be portrayed in scholarship as affirming the body and the physical and emphasizing joy and hope. However, the closer reading shows that the emphasis on the lofty source of foreign thoughts is meant to arouse in a person awe, as it underscores the dissonance between the higher divine source and the lowliness of the physical. In one of the long passages that teaches the technique of elevating foreign thoughts in stages, the crucial role of awe in this process becomes clear:

The desires and foreign thoughts that come upon a person, *has veshalom* [God forbid], are due to the attribute of *Hesed* that has fallen. When a person reflects on this when those evil desires come upon him, *Rahmanah letzlan* [God save us], and is afraid and anxious for the holy *Hesed* upon which all the worlds depend in His great compassion, he brings [it] to a lowly depraved place of animal desires – truly beastly acts – and when he achieves fear [of God] and has compassion for this precious thing that it has come to such a lowly state, then in this way he elevates this attribute [*Hesed*] to its source and brings the supernal *Hesed* upon himself. And he awakens *Hesed* and *Rahamim* upon the entire world in that he has compassion for the divine *Hesed* and causes *Hesed* and *Rahamim* to fill His glory; this is the *Shekhinah*, as it were. And there is another aspect is even greater than this. [This aspect is present] when one sees others, transgressors who are attracted to lasciviousness, *has veshalom*, and reflects upon this – that their desires come from the great *Hesed* that has fallen to the depths of the *kelipot*, *Rahmanah letzlan*, and one is afraid and anxious about this and feels compassion for and sympathy with divine *Hesed*, a precious and holy attribute that has fallen to lowliness and depravity and severe transgression as aforesaid [with regard to one’s own desires]. [This] also has the effect of elevating the *Hesed* to its source and causes *Hesed* and *Rahamim* to fill His Glory and the entire world, Amen.[[32]](#footnote-32)

This paragraph is dense and uses the vocabulary and the semantic space of evil as sin: *kelipot*, God save us, awe, lowliness, desire, etc. The warning *has veshalom*, like *Rahmanah letzlan*, often arises in the context of sin or trouble, as an expression that signifies a frightening situation. It should be noted, however, that these expressions sometimes have a rhetorical role: They mitigate the problematic message of the homily that contains an element of sanctification of transgression by ascribing to it a divine source. That is, the speaker uses these expressions to emphasize that he sees the transgression as a negative and frightening thing, although he will go on to examine its positive aspects.

However, the turning point in the homily before us is in the recognition that despite the elevated source of desire, material desires are “lowliness and depravity and severe transgression.” Through guided imagery, the passage mentally instructs the person in the emotional work required: “…he brings [it] to a lowly depraved place of animal desires – truly beastly acts – and when he achieves fear [of God] and has compassion for this precious thing that it has come to such a lowly state, then in this way he elevates this attribute [*Hesed*] to its source.” It is not the immanence of “fills the whole earth with His Glory,” but rather the gulf between the supreme divine source of desire and its expression in the world of material desires that gives rise to the repair, the *tikkun*. That is, it is precisely the recognition of disconnection, the breaking rather than the healing, that produces a deeper connection. The emotions that are supposed to arise as a result of this mental guidance – “one is afraid and anxious… and feels compassion… and sympathy” – are the ones that lead to “the effect of elevating the *Hesed*.” Thus, the idea of elevation has a built-in longing for the world of “transition,” for the negation of this world because of its materiality; this negation motivates man to find the source and the sacred root that will allow him to cancel the negative material side of desire. Only then, after the abolition of materiality, will he succeed in achieving the ideal of “fill[ing] the whole earth with His Glory” with which the passage concludes – an ideal which in fact only fills the whole earth when man purifies his mind and achieves sacred desire. These ideas are important in the analysis of another famous teaching that has been debated by scholars in the context of antinomistic conceptions of the BeShT:

I heard from my grandfather, my master, may he be remembered for eternal life, that the *Shekhinah* is [present] from above to below, at all the levels to the end. This is the secret meaning of “You give life to all of them” (Nehemiah 9:6). Even when a person commits a transgression, God forbid, the *Shekhinah* is also clothed in him. For otherwise, he would not have the power to do this or to move a single limb because it is He who give him vitality and gives him strength and life.[[33]](#footnote-33)

From this passage arises a seemingly pantheistic conception that affirms and endorses sin, for the *Shekhinah* is in man, even at the lowest level. However, even in this statement, the transgression is perceived as a threat, a prohibited and dangerous act, as the phrase “God forbid” indicates. Moreover, according to the passage before, it is clear that in the worldview of the BeShT, although all of reality has a divine source that is immanently present, there is still a clear division between good and evil; the role of man is to “‘avoid evil and do good’ (Psalms 34:15), that is, strive to remove from evil the evil that is in it, and to make it entirely good.”[[34]](#footnote-34) That is, man must identify the problematic part of this expression and separate it out; only then will the good immanent reality be able to come to fruition.

Thus, the divine service demanded by the traditions ascribed to the BeShT is not only the identification of the sacred spark in thought, but the emphasis that the world of matter and sin is evil. In another teaching, which, as far as I can tell, is not based on the writings of Rabbi Yaakov Yosef from Połonne, but is a unique teaching of the BeShT in the *Degel*, he even describes the world in such striking images as “soiled clothes,” “begrimed garments,” and “garment of… captivity”:

“And she will remove the garment of her captivity from herself…” (Deut. 21:13) – that he not take them in begrimed garments; just that he see to it that the soiled clothes are removed and separated from them and then their light will shine like the dawn.[[35]](#footnote-35)

The work of repair demands the separation of the negative expression from its positive inner essence, referred to as *havdalah* in a similar context in *Toldot* *Yaakov Yosef*.[[36]](#footnote-36) Here, however, the garment is not sanctified, but is removed, and nullified. In the present context, we will pay attention to the verbs: “not to take” (*lo likah*), “to remove” (*lehasir*), “to separate” (*lehafrid*). The work of distinguishing between good and evil, the identification of the negative in its impurity, in its ugliness, are all necessary in order to attain the result of the final enlightenment – “and then their light will shine like the dawn.”

Wisdom (*Hokhmah*), among the most prominent words in both the *Degel* and the BeShT (in the BeShT 0.0031, in *Degel* 0.0026), is not supposed to affirm desire, but to bury it, according to the teaching brought twice by R. Ephraim of Sudylkow in the name of the BeShT:

As I heard from my grandfather, my master, may he be remembered for eternal life, in the name of the *Sefer Brit Menuhah*, that The Tombs of Lust [*Kivrot Hata’avah*] (or Tombs of Desire) is the aspect of wisdom, because there they buried the people who had lusted (after meat- see Numbers 11) meaning when a person achieves the attribute of wisdom then all his desires are nullified due to the intensity of his cleaving [to God]. [[37]](#footnote-37) I have previously written in the name of my grandfather, my master, that when a person arrives at Wisdom then all foreign physical desires are nullified in him, except those necessary for man's existence in this world, and he said this in the name of *Sefer* *Brit Menuhah*.”[[38]](#footnote-38)

The author’s citing of *Brit Menuhah* and the analysis of this quotation has been discussed mainly in the context of the role of consciousness and the use of the mystical technique of letter combinations in traditions from the BeShT.[[39]](#footnote-39) In the context of the present analysis, it becomes clear that the quote conceals another message, which has remained unexplored by scholars so far. *Brit Menuhah* is cited in order to reinforce an ascetic, anti-physical message that cleaving to God (*devekut*) is contrary to materiality. Lusts and desires are not tempered here – one cannot elevate them, but only lower them into the depths of hell. Not only *devekut*, but *hokhma*, preoccupation with mental content, suppresses desire – a suppression that is viewed positively – and leaves only what is needed for continued bodily existence, preventing complete annihilation.

Another homily expresses a stern warning, incorporating the characteristic images of cautionary moral discourse, which contradicts the popular image of the BeShT as an opponent of rebuke:

It can be said about this, following what I heard from my grandfather, my master, may he be remembered for eternal life, about a country that sent a letter asking Maimonides, may his memory be a blessing, about the resurrection of the dead […] and its opposite, God forbid, becomes a paradigm for all that is spoiled and corrupted with foreign ideas and its vitality has taken on the aspect of a corpse, which is the father of fathers of impurity for all of him and his 248 limbs are defiled and “he will call impure, impure” (Lev. 13:45) about everything. He [the person who doubts the resurrection of the dead] misses the truth of [source of] life which is the divinity of all the worlds. He is defiled and falls into foreign ideas and other gods, the deaf, dead false gods, and [offerings to them] are called offerings to the dead. Therefore, the tanna’im[[40]](#footnote-40) and the amora’im,[[41]](#footnote-41) all those of stature and the sages of the Mishna all took care that they not be contaminated “from the king's food, and of the wine which he drank” (Daniel 1:5) and therefore the light of their intellect[s] shone and the holy spirit would rest upon them [enabling] them to interpret every obscure statement in the law of the holy Torah; for the divine power rested upon them, wherein He and the entire Torah are one. And the light of their souls is also the “threefold cord that (sic.) is not quickly broken” (Eccl. 4:12) forever and ever. Those people, however, are certainly impure and their blood is defiled and from it, their heart[s]; their brain[s] are befuddled from forbidden and impure foods. For this reason, their living soul inclines to heresy and disbelief and they are unable to receive the sweet nectar of the words of our teachings that are established in accordance with the intellect of the eternal God and Highest King. Since they insolently went outside, the Highest who extirpates will come and they will be extirpated, they and all they have. That is how he answered them and only a short time later a great king came against them and killed them and plundered all they had.[[42]](#footnote-42)

This paragraph constructs a clear division between the righteous and the wicked, between those who are careful in a relatively simple religious act – avoiding forbidden foods and wine – and those who are not careful. Those who are careful are associated with light in a sequence of images that emphasize their virtue: “the holy spirit would rest upon them [enabling] them to interpret every obscure statement in the law of the holy Torah; for the divine power rested upon them, wherein He and the entire Torah are one. And the light of their souls is also the “threefold cord that (sic.) is not quickly broken” (Eccl. 4:12) forever and ever.” By contrast, those who are not careful are identified with darkness, and their evil deeds receive a series of negative epithets: Their brains, hearts, and blood are befuddled and defiled, they fall into heresy and insolence, and therefore a severe punishment is imposed on them – they will be extirpated. The whole passage suggests that the antinomistic profile of the BeShT drawn by scholars is in need of correction, as it presents the BeShT as a leader who is troubled by the violation of the basic guidelines of kashrut. That is, here the BeShT is portrayed as a leader who attempts to strengthen the nomistic aspects of religious life through a discourse of rebuke and awe, fears violating the law, and portrays sin as a real and threatening danger.

# The Divine Voice and Authentication of Revelation

The other theme where the difference between the BeShT and the *Degel* arises is that of heavenly proclamation and the *bat kol* (divine or heavenly voice).[[43]](#footnote-43) In one of the passages in the *Degel* where the BeShT is described as testifying that he himself hears the divine voice directly, fear is an essential element of the description. The experience of revelation is not only a source of closeness to God that empowers man, but an experience of holiness as danger, which evokes a terrible awe in the BeShT:

Another time I heard from him on Sabbath eve, when he said to me while explaining the verse “who will go up for us to the heavens” (Deut. 30:12), and he hugged and kissed me and said that they are an acronym for circumcision [*milah*], a Torah scroll [*sefer Torah*] and the [name of] the Lord [*havayah*]. He said in these words: Here I swear to you, that there is a person in the world who hears the Torah directly from the Holy One blessed be He and His Presence and not from an angel or from… and does not himself believe that he will not be pushed away from the Holy One blessed be He, God forbid, for he can easily be pushed into the chasm of the great pit. And he based this on the verse “It is not in the heavens… and it is not across the sea…”(Deut. 30:12-12). May the Lord bring us close with His righteous right hand.[[44]](#footnote-44)

This intimate description of a close encounter between the BeShT as an old man and his grandson Ephraim of Sudylkow emphasizes the “great pit” into which even the greatest person can fall by means of various expressions of fear, also delineated by the phrase “God forbid.” The experience of revelation serves not only as inspiration and elation, but can also be threatening.[[45]](#footnote-45) Moreover, the words “proclamation” (*keruz*), “heavenly voice” (*bat kol*), and “revelation” (*hitgalut*) are closely related to the work of repair of sin, since the proclamation is identified with the contemplation of repentance. The vocal aspect of revelation has already been identified as an important component in the BeShT’s innovations, but the moral component of this revelation has not been discussed.[[46]](#footnote-46) What is important to emphasize in the present context is that the proclamation is not an affirmation of reality, but rather a rebuke, and a rebuke to those who are unable to hear it: “Woe to the people for the insult to the Torah.” These words arise from a teaching that Ephraim of Sudylkow both heard and found in *Sefer Toldot Yaakov Yosef* about the Sages of the Talmud, and specifically about the fact that every day a heavenly voice issues from Horev (Sinai):

One should say about this according to what I heard from my grandfather, my master, may he be remembered for eternal life, and is brought in *Sefer Toldot Yaakov Yosef* about the proclamation and the voice issued from heaven that proclaims and says “Woe to the people for the insult to the Torah” [Avot 6: 2]. In any case, if no one hears it, why is it issued? He said that they are the contemplations of repentance that come upon a person every day. It has the aspect of the voice and the proclamation. So a person can understand every proclamation issued by Heaven due to the aspect of his thoughts, if he possesses holy thoughts and monitors his thinking.[[47]](#footnote-47)

Thoughts of repentance indicate a consciousness aware of its deficiency and aware of divine concealment – and only when there is awareness of the distance is there an opportunity for closeness:

 And I will conceal [My face] (Deut. 31:18), because when a person does not know that there is a concealment, that is certainly not good, as he thinks that he is completely righteous and does not repent. However, when he knows that there is a concealment and feels [it] in his soul, then he surrenders before the Lord, may he be blessed and pleads before Him.

The traditions from the BeShT not only feature the word *tzaddik* as a dominant word but also attribute to it a special status in relation to the repair of transgressions and failure, a status principally concerning its ability to identify these within himself and thus bring about processes of repentance and repair not only for himself but for society as a whole, in all its dimensions. The world (*ha-olam*) is another extremely prominent word in the BeShT, with a frequency of 0.0069 – twice that of *Degel Mahaneh Ephraim*, where it is still prominent at 0.0035, but the difference is very significant: p <0.001.

“Whoever sinned against me...:” (Exodus 32:33), that is, that the Holy One blessed be He answered him that it was from them [the people] that the thought was suggested to him. For Moses held himself responsible for the failure [of the Golden Calf] and the result of this was that **occasionally a tzaddik comes to [perform] a minor transgression**, God forbid, even though “no sin will befall the righteous” (Proverbs 12:21). Nevertheless, **it is so that he may repent and arouse the entire world to repentance** for severe transgressions. Indeed, there are righteous people who repent themselves even though they have not sinned at all and arouse repentance for the entire world; this is greatly to his credit.[[48]](#footnote-48)

In this paragraph, a justification for the sin of the tzaddik ostensibly arises, but this justification exists only when the tzaddik channels it for the purpose of repentance and repair. The justification for the sin of the tzaddik is that through his unmediated acquaintance with sin, he is able to arouse the world, that is, to speak to the heart of the people, and to perform an emotional act for them. However, even higher than this is the tzaddik who has not fallen or sinned at all, and who still succeeds in this task. It is important to emphasize that the tzaddik’s sin is due to forgetfulness, to a defect of consciousness, and therefore the correction depends on the tzaddik:

According to what I heard from my grandfather, my master, may he be remembered for eternal life, the in the word ‘sin’ [*het*], the letter *alef* is not evident in its pronunciation (*het* is spelled *het*, *tet*, *alef*) and the reason is that the evildoer when he wants to commit a transgression forgets the Master of [*Alufo*] the world.[[49]](#footnote-49)

The momentary detachment of thought from the awareness of and devotion to God is sufficient to be considered a transgression and a sin, according to a passage on the verse “Happy is the man whom God does not ascribe him a sin (Psalms 32:2).” In the literal meaning of the verse, the word “ascribe” (*yahshov*) is the predicate and God is the subject – happy is the man to whom God does not ascribe a sin. However, in the homily cited in the name of the BeShT, the subject and the predicate reversed, i.e., “happy is the man who thinks about God [and otherwise] it is regarded as a sin”:

According to what I heard from my grandfather, my master, may he be remembered for eternal life, on the verse: ““Happy is the man whom God does not ascribe him a sin,” that is, that he is always in a state where his thought cleaves to the Lord, may he be blessed. Therefore, when for a moment it lapses from his thought and he does not think about the Lord, it is regarded as a sin and a transgression.[[50]](#footnote-50)

The forgetful consciousness, detached from God, is not only a sin, it is “the sin,” and is regarded as tantamount to idolatry:

And this is what my grandfather, my master, may he be remembered for eternal life, said: “and you turn aside, and serve other gods…” (Deut. 11:16) For as soon as he turned himself aside from cleaving the true attachment to the Creator, may He be blessed, then he is regarded as a worshipper of other gods, which have the aspect of falsehood.[[51]](#footnote-51)

Gershom Scholem pointed out that the demand implicit in this passage, that ceasing to cleave to God is the essence of sin, is so severe that their arose a need to soften it.[[52]](#footnote-52) The BeShT’s doctrine gives rise to very high moral demands, and although the BeShT comforts the tzaddikim who have sinned by attributing significance to sin, this justification is accompanied by repeated warnings about the moral tension required of man, the need to fear sin and the constant need for repair.

# Conclusion

This article is the first of its kind in the study of Kabbalah and Hasidism to combine the statistical tools of distant reading with textual analysis in close reading. The statistical tools were used for a literary characterization of the corpora and for an identification of the many similarities between the teachings of the BeShT in the writings of his student-grandson, the *Degel Mahaneh Ephraim*, as well as a number of differences that indicate a level of complexity in traditions from the BeShT. I chose to focus on those words that appear with high frequency in the teachings of the BeShT but not in the rest of the *Degel*. These passages reveal the nomistic and revelatory aspects of the BeShT tradition. I argue that the inclusion of these words indicates on the one hand the *Degel*’s choice to cite traditions of a particular character, and on the other hand, that he did not seek to expand upon the BeShT’s words on these subjects. A close examination of the texts that feature the clusters of awe and revelation reveals a complex picture of the BeShT’s thought. The BeShT that emerges from these teachings proves to be a preacher in the classic sense – he does not necessarily emphasize the aspects of love, joy, or the tempering judgment, but rather expresses fear and dread of the dangers of sin and revelation. Indeed, he does focus on the mental aspects of divine service and the revelatory character of man’s thoughts, but a sense of trembling and anxiety of sin stands at the core of these discussions. fear and the inner voice that calls for repentance and the repair of sin serve as central motivators for the self-conscious mental work required in the service of God according to the BeShT.

# Appendix: List of the most prominent words in the *Degel* and BeShT in descending order

\*p<0.05

\*\*p<0.01

\*\*\*p<0.001

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| *Degel* without BeShT teachings | BeShT teachings in Degel |
| תורה\*\* (Torah) | 0.01048 | אדם\*\*\* (Person) | 0.01146 |
| איחוד שמות האל\*\*\* (Unification of God’s Names) | 0.006085 | איחוד שמות האל\*\*\* (Unification of God’s Names) | 0.01105 |
| ישראל\*\* (Israel) | 0.00498 | מלך\*\*\* (King) | 0.007094 |
| אדם\*\*\* (Person) | 0.004453 | תורה\*\* (Torah) | 0.007094 |
| העולם\*\*\* (The world) | 0.003349 | העולם\*\*\* (The world) | 0.006958 |
| צדיק (Tzaddik/righteous) | 0.00319 | אותיות (Letters) | 0.00382 |
| השכינה (The *Shekhinah*) | 0.003053 | צדיק (Tzaddik/righteous) | 0.003411 |
| אותיות (Letters) | 0.002938 | חכמה (Wisdom) | 0.003138 |
| יעקב\* (Jacob) | 0.002887 | רע\*\*\* (Evil) | 0.003138 |
| חכמה (Wisdom) | 0.002671 | ח"ו (God forbid) | 0.003001 |
| חסד (Mercy) | 0.002606 | יראה (Will see) | 0.002729 |
| אמת (Truth) | 0.002411 | ישראל\*\* (Israel) | 0.002592 |
| אור (Light) | 0.002173 | ייחוד (Unification) | 0.002456 |
| ייחוד (Unification) | 0.002144 | עולמות\*\*\* (Worlds) | 0.002456 |
| דעת (Knowledge) | 0.002115 | השכינה (The *Shekhinah*) | 0.002319 |
| חיים\* (Life) | 0.002057 | חסד (Mercy) | 0.002183 |
| ח"ו (God forbid) | 0.002007 | אור (Light) | 0.002046 |
| יראה (Will see) | 0.002007 | זרה\*\*\* (Foreign) | 0.002046 |
| מלך\*\*\* (King) | 0.001913 | סוד (Secret) | 0.002046 |
| סוד (Secret) | 0.001877 | דעת (Knowledge) | 0.00191 |
| אברהם (Abraham) | 0.001768 | מחשבה (Thought) | 0.00191 |
| נשמה\*\* (Soul) | 0.00174 | מלכות\*\* (Kingdom) | 0.00191 |
| מצוה, מצוות (Commandment/s) | 0.001696 | קול\*\*\* (Voice) | 0.001637 |
| איש (Man) | 0.001552 | אמת (Truth) | 0.001501 |
| מחשבה (Thought) | 0.001292 | יעקב\* (Jacob) | 0.001501 |
| לשמה (For its own sake) | 0.001292 | ר"ל =רחמנא ליצלן (God save us) | 0.001501 |
| ממש (Really) | 0.00122 | חכם (Sage) | 0.001501 |
| חכם (Sage) | 0.001039 | שלום\*\* (Peace) | 0.001501 |
| קליפות (Husks) | 0.000881 | אברהם (Abraham) | 0.001364 |
| ר"ל =רחמנא ליצלן (God save us) | 0.000844 | איש (Man) | 0.001364 |
| מלכות\*\* (Kingdom) | 0.000823 | חטא (Sin) | 0.001364 |
| עולמות\*\*\* (Worlds) | 0.000736 | לשמה (For its own sake) | 0.001364 |
| חטא (Sin) | 0.000729 | מצוה, מצוות (Commandment/s) | 0.001091 |
| רע\*\*\* (Evil) | 0.000671 | קליפות (Husks) | 0.000955 |
| יצר (Urge) | 0.00065 | חיים\* (Life) | 0.000819 |
| שלום\*\* (Peace) | 0.000556 | כרוז\*\*\* (Proclamation) | 0.000546 |
| קול\*\*\* (Voice) | 0.000346 | ממש (Really) | 0.000546 |
| צער (Sorrow) | 0.000224 | צער (Sorrow) | 0.000409 |
| זרה\*\*\* (Foreign) | 0.00018 | יצר (Urge) | 0.000273 |
| כרוז\*\*\* (Proclamation) | 2.17E-05 | נשמה\*\* (Soul) | 0.000273 |

1. On the mythological figure of the Baal Shem Tov and his role in the creation of the Hasidic movement, see the recent research of Jonatan Meir*, The Mythological Figure of Israel Baal Shem Tov, Three Lectures* (Jerusalem: Schocken Institute for Jewish Research, 2020), [Heb.]; David Biale, David Assaf, Benjamin Brown, Uriel Gellman, Samuel Heilman, Moshe Rosman, Gadi Sagiv, and Marcin Wodziński, *Hasidism: New History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), 43-75; Moshe Rosman, *Founder of Hasidism: A Quest for the Historical Ba’al Shem Tov* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1996). For further bibliography in the study of the Baal Shem Tov, see Rachel Elior, *Israel Baal Shem Tov and his Contemporaries* (Jerusalem: Carmel, 2014) (2 volumes) [Heb.], end of Volume II; Pedaya, *Ba’al Shem Tov*, [Heb.], 441-438. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For the development of the quantitative tools for distance reading in the study of literature, see Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading* (London: Verso, 2013). This pioneering study is an investigation of literary narratives and their relation to geography, a use of distant reading that is quite distinct from what I will employ here. Similar studies deal with the characterization of ideological trends in religious corpora. A groundbreaking study of this kind characterizes the relationship between body and spirit concepts in Chinese literature: Edward Slingerland, “The Distant Reading of Religious Texts: A ‘Big Data’ Approach to Mind-Body Concepts in Early China,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 85.4 (2017): 985-1016. All of these studies use statistical tools to analyze broad corpora. Here, the use of statistical tools is restricted to a limited literary corpus; I will demonstrate how even in a small corpus of this kind, which a single person can read in a relatively short time, quantitative tools are effective in directing close reading. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For this interaction between the classification, counting, and adjustment that occurs in mechanistic analysis and critical discourse and cultural practices, with reference to advances in distant reading strategies since Morty's study, see Johanna Drucker, “Why Distant Reading Isn’t,” *PMLA* 132.3 (2017): 628-635, and particularly the concluding remarks, pp. 633-634. For articles in the humanities that seek to integrate distant and close reading, see Joanna E. Taylor, Ian N. Gregory, Christopher Donaldson, “Combining Close and Distant Reading: A Multiscalar Analysis of the English Lake District's Historical Soundscape,” *International Journal of Humanities and Arts Computing* 12.2 (2018): 163-182; A. Hammond, A.J. Brooke and G. Hirst, “Modeling Modernist Dialogism: Close Reading with Big Data,” in *Reading Modernism With Machines: Digital Humanities and Modernist Literature,* eds. S. Ross and J. O'Sullivan (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 49–78. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ro‘i Horn’s recent book summarizes the main approaches in the research of traditions in the name of the BeShT and categorically distinguishes between the different types of sources. See Ro‘i Horn, *HaBa’al Shem Tov veKabalat haAri: Kavanot veYehudim lehaMatakat haDinim sheMasar meHolel haHasidut leTalmidav*, (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan Press, 2003), 16-23. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For a recent review in the context of digital humanities and their connection to the study of Hasidism, see Marcin Wodziński, “Big Data,” in *Studying Hasidism: Sources, Methods, Perspectives*, ed. Marcin Wodziński (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2019), 268-286. With regard to the study of Hebrew literature, including its challenges and prospects not only in the creation of quantitative databases but in new tools of thinking and analysis, see Itay Marienberg, “Beyond digitization? Digital Humanities and the case of Hebrew literature,” *Digital Scholarship in the Humanities* 34.4 (2019): 908-913. For the use of digital humanities in the production of a platform for crowdsourcing in Jewish studies, see Allan J. Wecker et al., “Tikkoun Sofrim: A WebApp for Personalization and Adaptation of Crowdsourcing Transcriptions,” *UMAP ’19* (2019): 109-110. This project uses the input of the public to correct the transcription of genizah texts. For current projects in digital humanities in the field of Jewish studies, led by Moshe Lavi, Eli Ben Eliyahu and Ephraim Lev, see the website https://elijahlab.haifa.ac.il/. For an advanced digital project on Jewish burial and epigraphs, which facilitates the gathering of a great deal of information about Jewish communities through information about Jewish burial in various communities around the world, see PEACE Portal, led by Ortal Paz Saar. https://peace.sites.uu.nl/about/peace/. Previous studies include Michelle Chesner, “JS / DH: An Introduction to Jewish Studies / Digital Humanities Resources,” *Judaica Librarianship* 20 (2017): 194-196; Gerben Zaagsma, “#DHJewish - Jewish Studies in the Digital Age,” *Medaon - Magazin für jüdisches Leben in Forschung und Bildung* 12 (2018): 1–11. All of these studies are characterized by the accessibility of databases to researchers among the general public, advanced search options, and even the possibility of public contribution to the development of the database, as in the Tikkun Sofrim project. The present study is not about accessing information but about quantitative analytical analysis of information that has already been partially accessed digitally, but has undergone further significant processing and filtering. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See the criticism raised by Wodziński on the disadvantages of such research in his chapter on Big Data and the study of Hasidism – specifically, that as a rule analyses of the databases are limited in their use. Wodziński, “Big Data,” 270. For the changes in approach created by the digital interaction between scholars in Jewish studies and historical material as a result of the creation of new digital spaces in the postmodern era, see Nils Roemer, “Wissenschaft des Judentums, Postmodernism, and Digital Humanities 2.0,” in *Jewish Historiography Between Past and Future*, ed. Paul Mendes-Flohr, Rachel Livneh-Freudenthal, & Guy Miron (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), 91-104. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Wodziński, “Big Data,” 279-283. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Marcin Wodziński, “Space and Spirit: On Boundaries Hierarchies and Leadership in Hasidism,” *Journal of Historical Geography* 53 (2016): 63–74. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Wodziński, “Big Data,” 273-275. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. For historical-biographical research on Ephraim of Sudylkow, see S.A. Horodetsky, *Hasidut vehaHasidim* (Tel Aviv 1953), 7-11 [Heb.]; S. Dubnow, *Geschichte des Chassidismus* (Berlin: Jüdischer Verlag, 1931); Mandel Pikaz, *Hahanhaga haHasidut: Smikhut veEmunat Tzaddikim beAspeklarit Sefruta shel haHasidut*, (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1959), 165-171. For the image of the BeShT that emerges from the testimonies of Ephraim of Sudylkow, as an artist but not a learned sage, see Rosman, *Founder of Hasidism*. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. For the difficulties in calculation presented by the various sources, see Chaim Elly Moseson, “From Spoken Word to the Discourse of the Academy: Reading the Sources for the Teaching of the Besht,” Ph.D. dissertation, Boston University 2015, 188, n. 534. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Hasidic tradition marks 1600 as the year of his death. There is evidence that he died before 1803; see Moseson, "From Spoken Word," 189, n. 536. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Moseson, “From Spoken Word,” 189-190, n. 538 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Moseson, “From Spoken Word,” 196. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Roland Goetschel, “*Torah Lishmahh* as a Central Concept in the *Degel Mahaneh Efrayim* of Moses Hayyim Ephraim of Sudylkow,” in *Hasidism Reappraised* ed. Ada Rapoport-Albert (London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1996), 258-67; Alan Brill, “The Spiritual World of a Master of Awe: Divine Vitality, Theosis, and Healing in the *Degel Mahaneh Ephraim*,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 8 (2001): 27-65; Rosman, *Founder of Hasidism*, 132-3. We shall return to these studies later in the present article. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Tsippi Kauffman, *In All Your Ways Know Him: The Concept of God and Avodah be-Gashmiyut in the Early Stages of Hasidism* [Heb.], (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2009), 500-522. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Iris Brown, “The Parable of the Walls: Three Transformations,” *Jerusalem Studies in Hebrew Literature* 23 (2009): 99-132 [Heb.]. For further discussions of this parable, see Moshe Idel, “The Parable of the Son of the King and the Imaginary Walls in Early Hasidism,” in *The Book of Rebecca – Judaism: Issues, Aspects, Excerpts, Identities*, ed. Haviva Pedaya and Ephraim Meir (Beer Sheva: Ben Gurion University Press, 2007), 87-116; Ron Margolin, *Inner Religion in Jewish Sources: A Phenomenology of Inner Religious Life and Its Manifestation from the Bible to Hasidic Texts* (Boston, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2021), here he emphasizes the conscious internalization of the idea while discussing the concept of deception; Gershom Scholem, *'"Devekut" ou "Histkashrut Intimit im Elohim"',* in *HaShelav haAharon: Mehaqrei haHasidut shel Gershom Scholem*, ed. David Assaf and Esther Liebes, (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2008), 255-256; Yosef Weiss, “*Reshit Tzmihata shel haDerekh haHasidut,”* *Tzion* 16 (1951): 97-100; Rachel Elior, *Freedom on the Tablets, The Mystical Origins and Kabbalistic Foundations of Hasidic Thought* (Heb.), (Tel Aviv: Broadcast University, Ministry of Defense Press, 2000), 102-103; Immanuel Etkes, *The Besht—Magician, Mystic, and Leader,* trans. Saadya Sternberg (Waltham, MA:  Brandeis University Press/Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 2005), 144-147. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Moshe Idel, *Vocal Rites and Broken Theologies: Cleaving to Vocables in R. Israel Ba‘al Shem Tov’s Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 2020), 118-120. See also the discussion in Moshe Idel, *Enchanted Chains: Techniques and Rituals in Jewish Mysticism* (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2005), 154-155. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Idel, *Vocal Rites*, 140-142, 226. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Brill, “Spiritual World”. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Brill, “Spiritual World,” 31-44. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Brill, “Spiritual World,” 45-49, 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Roee Horen, The Ba’al Shem Tov and the Lurianic Kabbalah: Intentions and Unifications for Sweetening the Judgments Delivered by the Founder of Hasidism to his Disciples (Ramat Gan: University Press, 2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Elliot R. Wolfson, “Walking as a Sacred Duty: Theological Transformation of Social Reality in Early Hasidism,” in *Along the Path: Studies in Kabbalistic Myth, Symbolism, and Hermeneutics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 89-109. For a specific discussion of traditions in the Degel, see 92-94. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. For Goetschel’s remarks about the emotional significance of the combination of awe and love, see Goetschel, *“Torah Lishmah,”* 262, 264, 266. On the role of *dehilu verehimu* (awe and love) in the beginning of Hasidism in *Sefer Ma’or Einayim* by Menachem Nahum of Chernobyl, its source in *Tikkunei Zohar*, and its meaning in the context of self-annihilation and nullification vs. the affirmation of reality, see Ron Margolin, *The Human Temple: Religious Interiorization and the Structuring of Inner Life in Early Hasidism* [Heb.] (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2005),160-163. For a further discussion of the concept of *dehilu verehimu* in the Maggid’s words to Yaakov and its ecstatic meaning, see 200-204. Elsewhere, Margolin quoted a text from the *Degel Mahaneh Ephraim* that addressed *dehilu verehimu* but deployed it towards another claim – that the Hasidim rejected the complicated approach of the kabbalistic intention of names and unifications, in favor of a conception that emphasized an inner intention of cleaving (*devekut*) to God. See Margolin, *Inner Religion*, 107. For a critique of the *Degel* brought on behalf of the BeShT, on views of extreme spirituality from the Beit Midrash of the Maggid, and the affirmation of vitality in the spiritual reality of the individual which Margolin calls “spiritual existentialism,” see Margolin, *Inner Religion*, 355-356. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Kauffman, *In All Your Ways*, 566. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. For example, Tsippi Kauffman emphasized the immanence that also exists in sin as it emerges from the BeShT’s quotes in *Degel Mahaneh Ephraim*. On this, see Kauffman, *In All Your Ways*, 501 n.5. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. For brief but notable remarks on the role of awe as balancing love in *Degel*, see Brill, ‘‘Spiritual World,” esp. 45–49; Garb, *The History of Modern Kabbalah: From the Early Modern Period to the Present Day* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 118. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. For a preliminary examination of the role of fear and awe in Zoharic literature, which requires further analysis, see Isaiah Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar: Anthology of Texts*, trans. David Goldstein (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), III, 974–998. For other studies that emphasize the constructive role of fear in the mystical experience, see Yoni Garb, “Fear and Power in Renaissance Mediterranean Kabbalah,” in *Fear and Its Representations: In the Middle Ages and Renaissance,* ed. Anne Scott & Cynthia Kosso (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2002), 137–151; Yehuda Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, trans. Arnold Schwartz et al. (Albany: State University of New York, 1993), 34–37. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Saba Mahamood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 140. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Unlike the discussion of the experience of the sublime and awe in Hasidism and Kabbalah, little has been written about fear in the establishment of the politics of Hasidism. See Moshe Idel, “‘Ganz Andere’: On Rudolph Otto and Concepts of Holiness in Jewish Mysticism,” *Daat* 57/59 (2006): v – xliv [Heb.]; Jonathan Garb, “From Fear to Awe in Luzzatto’s Mesillat Yesharim,” *EJJS* 14 (2020): 290–291. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. *Degel Mahaneh Ephraim*, Vayiggash, 27: 1-3. For a discussion of another teaching from the BeShT that deals with the elevation of foreign thoughts in the *Degel,* see Biale, *Hasidism: New History*, 179-181. The sermon in *Toldot Yaakov Yosef*, Vayetze, ??, also uses the phrase “the depths of the husks” and the awe that Yaakov experiences upon this fall. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. *Degel Mahaneh Ephraim* Ki Tetze, ??. For a discussion of this sermon in the context of a transgression for its own sake, see Kauffman, *In All Your Ways*, p. 569. See also Idel, “Models of Understanding Prayer,” 45-46. This teaching is not presented in the writings of R. Yaakov Yosef, and even contradicts the homily presented, for example, in the introduction to the *Toledot* of Yaakov Yosef, which is based on R. Haim Vital’s *Sha’arei Kedushah*. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. *Degel Mahaneh Ephraim,* Toledot, p #??? [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. *Degel,* p.29. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. A homily on the same verse, “and removed the captive's dress,” casts it as a distinction between the sorrow brought on by the transgression itself and the positive spark that fell from it. For this, see *Toldot Yaakov Yosef*, Ki Tetze, 93-94. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. See also *Degel,* Masei 9a. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. *Degel* 86a. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. #  Margolin quotes this passage in the context of the identification of reality with consciousness or thought, but does not address the question of lust. See Margolin, *Inner Religion*, 413 n.174. For further discussion, see Esther Liebes, *Ahava veYetzira beHagoto shel R. Baruch Makosov*, (PhD dissertation, Hebrew University, 1997), [Heb.] 81-84; Haviva Pedaya, “*haBa’al Shem Tov, R. Yaakov Yosef mePolonne vehaMaggid meMezeritch: Korei Yesod leGisa Tipologit Datit*,” *Daat* 45 (2005), 38. Pedaya discusses this passage in the context of the centrality of *Sefer Brit Menuhah* in BeShT traditions; see 36-39. For a discussion of the meaning of the concept of *Kivrot Hata’avah* in its original context in *Brit Menuhah* as lust for attainment, as well as its adaptations in kabbalistic literature, see Oded Porat, *Sefer Brit ha-Menuḥah (Book of Covenant of Serenity): Critical Edition and Prefaces* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2016), 31-35 [Heb.]. There, he hypothesized that the idea had passed from the author of *Shenei Luhot Haberit* to the BeShT.

 [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. The sages of the Mishna. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. The sages of the Talmud. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. *Degel Mahaneh Ephraim ,* Eqev, 88a-b. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Nevertheless, the author of the *Degel* does touch on different appearances of revelation. For example, this topic is related to the *Degel Mahaneh Ephraim*’s disclosure of dreams, a topic mentioned by Idel, and we will not expand on it here. Idel noted this issue in the context of paranormal experiences in Hasidism. See Moshe Idel, *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 100 n. 34, as well as the revelation of the secrets of the Torah from the holy spirit. For this, see Idel, *Hasidism*, 323, and the reference to the *Degel Mahaneh Ephraim*, 241. Margolin discusses dreams in the *Degel* and emphasizes that despite the resemblance to R. Chaim Vital's dreams, the emotional and realistic aspect is dominant in the former's dreams, as opposed to the fantastic tone of the latter. See Margolin, *Inner Religion*, 178. Another word associated with revelation is *Lishmah,* “for its own sake,” a word that repeats itself prominently in the BeShT but not the *Degel*. Idel explained the use of this word as signifying the study of the Name of God within the Torah, with *Lishmah* representing two models: first, vocal activity whose ultimate purpose is *devekut* and the invocation of the *Shekhinah* via letter permutation; or, alternatively, the drawing-out of magical abundance through letters of the Torah. Idel, *Hasidism*, 333-338. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. *Degel Mahaneh Ephraim* Addendum 71. For a discussion of this experience of pride mixed with fear and humility, see Gershom Scholem, “*Demuto haHistorit shel R. Yisrael HaBaal Shem Tov,*” in Scholem, *HaShelav haAharon,* 127. For a quote from this source as an expression of the BeShT's self-reflection, see Weiss, “Reshit Tzemihata,” 85-86 n. 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. For a description of the fear of the danger of falling as it appears in this passage, see Etkes, *The Besht,* 143-144. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. For the voice of humans in prayer as summoning the revelation of the *Shekhinah* in Ephraim of Sudylkow, in the context of innovative views of prayer as a form of revelation, see Moshe Idel, “*Adonay Sefatay Tiftah*: Models of Understanding Prayer in Early Hasidism,” *Kabbalah* 18 (2008), 38-40. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. *Degel Mahaneh Ephraim*, Shelah Lekha 7a-9c, and see also Vayikra 23a: “Every day a heavenly voice goes out from Mount Horev … and necessarily … because the heavenly voice is the thoughts of repentance that come to a person every day and whoever has knowledge, as soon as he has a thought of repentance, then he understands that it is from the proclamation that is proclaimed “return backsliding children,” (Jer. 3:33), and he immediately examines his actions and repents completely. But he who is without knowledge experiences not thoughts of repentance come upon him and does not turn to Him at all.” *Degel*, Vayikra, 53c: “According to what my grandfather, my master said ... a heavenly voice issues from Mount Horev…. since there is no one to hear why is a heavenly voice issued? He explained that these are thoughts of repentance that come upon a person every day and arouse him to repent of his actions and certainly whoever stands and awaits its coming and when he hears the sound of the call, he will surely hear and understand that it has come to awaken him to repentance.” See 89d. Compare *Toledot Yaakov Yosef*, Beha‘alotekha, 139d. There, the idea is that the heavenly voice is revealed as the thoughts of repentance, but only in those who have knowledge. Elsewhere, however, the BeShT is cited as saying that it is also revealed to the wicked. See Emor, 105a, Re‘eh 174a. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. *Degel Mahaneh Ephraim*, Likkutim, 106a. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. *Degel Mahaneh Ephraim*, Likkutim 150b. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. *Degel Mahaneh Ephraim*, Vayikra 54b. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. *Degel Mahaneh Ephraim,* Terumah 54a. See also Qedoshim 64b. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Scholem, *'"Devekut" ou "Histkashrut Intimit im Elohim"',* in *HaShelav haAharon,* 244. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)