
Theoretical Antinomianism and the Conservative Function of Utopia: Rabbi Mordekhai Yosef of Izbica as a Case Study*

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The thought of Rabbi Mordekhai Yosef Leiner of Izbica (1800–1854, hereafter also “the Izbicer”), author of *Mei Hashiloah*,¹ has fascinated sympathizers of “Jewish spiritualism,” both scholars and popular practitioners of New Age leanings, for several decades.² This nineteenth-century hasidic leader, who had allegedly approved deviating from halakhic rules in certain cases, has been described as “bold” and “antinomian” and has excited the imagination of both those searching for a path through life and influential scholars. Clearly, this enthusiasm for Leiner is not free of ideological motives. The search for thinkers in the Jewish tradition—an unequivocally nomic tradition—who found spiritual expression beyond the confines of the law is part of prolonged efforts by various modern Jewish leaders and movements to find lofty sources of legitimation for their own aspirations to similarly express themselves. While this may, of course, be a legitimate cause, critical scholarship

* I wish to thank the anonymous reviewers of the article for their helpful comments.

¹ References to this book will be made to its first editions: R. Mordekhai Yosef Leiner, *Mei Hashiloah* I (Vienna: Adelbert della Torre, 1860) and *Mei Hashiloah* II–IV (Lublin: Hershenhorn & Streisberger, 1922). All the translations from this book are mine.

² I only note a portion of the scholarship devoted to Leiner and his thought: Joseph G. Weiss, “Torat hadeterminism hadati leRabbi [the religious determinism of Rabbi] Yosef Mordekhai Leiner MeIzbica,” in *Sefer Yovel LeYitzhak Baer*, ed. S. Ettinger et al. (Jerusalem: Historical Society of Israel, 1960), 447–53; Joseph G. Weiss, *Studies in Eastern European Jewish Mysticism* (Oxford: Littman Library, 1985), 209–48; Rivka Schatz, “Haaautonomia shel Haruah Vektorat Moshe,” *Molad* 21 (1963): 554–61; Morris M. Faienstein, *All Is in the Hands of Heaven: The Teachings of Rabbi Mordecai Joseph Leiner of Izbica* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2005), and “Kotsk-Izbica Dispute: Theological or Personal?,” *Kabbalah* 17 (2008): 75–79; Rachel Elijor, “Temurot bamahshava hadatit bahasidut Polin: Bein ‘yir’ah’ ve’ahava’ le“amek’ ve’gavan” [The innovation of Polish Hasidism], *Tarbiz* 62, no. 3 (1993): 402–30; Shaul Magid, *Hasidism on the Margin: Reconciliation, Antinomianism, and Messianism in Izbica and Radzin Hasidism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003); Jerome I. Gellman, *The Fear, the Trembling, and the Fire: Kierkegaard and Hasidic Masters on the Binding of Isaac* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1994),

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must remain vigilant. It should examine such cases thoroughly, along two complementary axes: the text and its context. In other words, for the case at hand, it must examine critically the sources of the ideas, most importantly those appearing in the Izbicer's *Mei Hashiloah*, as well as the sources providing insight into his persona and the historical context of his actions. In this article, I conduct such a re-examination, which yields new and surprising insights into Leiner's thought. Consequently, I argue the following: (a) the textual inquiry reveals that the Izbicer did indeed write in the spirit of a "soft-antinomianism" that, under certain circumstances, permits and even requires deviation from Halakhah. However, he was careful to qualify and limit his instructions to ideal people and situations that are far removed from actual reality. (b) The contextual examination reinforces the interpretation whereby the Izbicer's antinomian discourses were not aimed at endorsing (and certainly not encouraging) deviations from Halakhah. Rather, they were an aid in developing an approach that accepts human nature as is rather than struggling against it, an approach that constituted a reaction to the radical positions of Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Kotzk (hereafter also "the Kotzker").

If this interpretation is correct, however, it leads to a further question: If the Izbicer had no real intention for these radical positions to be acted upon, why did he express them in the first place? The texts themselves provide no answer to this question, and we can only attempt to solve the conundrum through deductions based on the context. Regardless, our deduction work can contribute much toward understanding the broader religious phenomenon represented by the Izbicer rebbe: a phenomenon I call "theoretical antinomianism."³ The primary purpose of this article is to raise this fun-

and *Abraham! Abraham!: Kierkegaard and the Hasidim on the Binding of Isaac* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003); Avi'ezer Cohen, "Toda'ah 'Atzmit Besefer Mei Hashiloah Kikhli Lekiyum Hazikkah Shebein Hael Laadam" [Self-consciousness in Mei Hashiloah as nexus between God and man] (doctoral diss., Ben Gurion University, 2006); Yehuda Ben-Dor, "Iyun Bemei Hashiloah LeRabbi Mordekhai Yosef MeIzbica" [A study in R. Mordechai Yosef of Izbica's Mei HaShiloah] (doctoral diss., Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2008); Jonathan Meir, "Ma'amad Hamitzvot Behaguto shel [The status of the Commandments in the thought of] Rabbi Mordekhai Yosef Leiner MeIzbica," *Mishlav* 35 (2000): 27–53; Herzl Hefter, "'In God's Hands': The Religious Phenomenology of R. Mordechai Yosef of Izbica," *Tradition* 46, no. 1 (2013): 43–65; Don Seeman, "Martyrdom, Emotion and the Work of Ritual in R. Mordecai Joseph Leiner's Mei Hashiloah," *AJS Review* 27, no. 2 (2003): 253–80; Yif'at Lev, "'Ki Hineah Hamelakhim No'adu': Hametah Bein Hasiduyot Izbica VeGur Kefi She'oleh Miderashot Benose Yehudah VeYosef" [The tension between Izbica and Gur as reflected in homilies on Judah and Joseph] (master's thesis, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2014). Important analyses on the Izbicer appear also in studies about his disciples, such as Ora Wiskind-Elper, *Wisdom of the Heart: The Teachings of Rabbi Ya'akov of Izbica-Radzyn* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2010); Alan Brill, *Thinking God: The Mysticism of Rabbi Zadok of Lublin* (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 2002).

³ I owe the term "theoretical antinomianism" to one of the anonymous reviewers of a previous article of mine. The reviewer used this term to refer to a phenomenon brought up in that article, and I found it to be brilliantly apt and useful in understanding the phenomenon as a whole.

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damental question and offer preliminary paths to its solution. R. Mordekhai Yosef Leiner of Izbica serves as the test case for this endeavor.⁴

I begin with a brief introduction to the Izbicer's life and core teachings as reflected in existing literature (this section is intended primarily for those who are unfamiliar with Leiner and his teachings; those who are may proceed to the next section). This is followed by a discussion of the problems this sort of interpretation raises. I conclude with a further discussion of the fundamental nature of theoretical antinomianism.

RABBI MORDEKHAI YOSEF LEINER: A BIOGRAPHICAL AND THEOLOGICAL SKETCH

Rabbi Mordekhai Yosef Leiner was born in 1800, in Tomashov (Tomaszów Lubelski), to a prominent and well-to-do family that claimed many illustrious rabbis as ancestors.⁵ As a young man, Leiner joined the court of Rabbi Simha Bunem of Pshiskhe (ca. 1765–1827) and quickly distinguished himself in this elite group. Rabbi Bunem led a Hasidism emphasizing personal responsibility, “truth,” “interiority,” the study of the Torah (including philosophical treatises) and an avoidance of external collective expressions in the worship of God.⁶ In contrast to the path of eighteenth-century Hasidism,

⁴ Joseph G. Weiss had already, in a remarkable paper published in 1964, interpreted the antinomianism of *Mei Hashiloah* as an instance of utopian messianism and therefore lacking relevance to contemporary reality: Joseph Weiss, “Eine spätjüdischer Utopie Religiöser Freiheit,” *Eranos Jahrbuch* 32 (1964): 235–80. Its English translation appears in his *Studies in Eastern European Jewish Mysticism*, 209–48. While later scholars of the Izbicer rebbe may have been familiar with Weiss's paper, they preferred nonetheless to pursue other interpretive approaches which presented him as “bolder.” Although I do agree in principle with Weiss's analysis, I find it important to present my own interpretation, which differs from Weiss's in several ways. In contrast to Weiss, I do not find strong mystical dimensions in the Izbicer's thought; I do find (in continuation to a trend set by Fairstein, *All Is in the Hands of Heaven*) many personal and responsive dimensions that may render a better understanding of that thought; I emphasize Weiss's correct observations about Leiner's temperate character and nomic inclination, ascribing to them paramount importance; and most importantly, my analysis attempts to discover why precisely the Izbicer turned to antinomianism when he himself ultimately nullified its significance.

⁵ This biographical sketch is based primarily on Fairstein, *All Is in the Hands of Heaven*, 15–26.

⁶ For more on Rabbi Bunem of Pshiskhe, see Michael Rosen, *The Quest for Authenticity: The Thought of Reb Simhah Bunim* (Jerusalem: Urim, 2008); Glenn Dynner, *Men of Silk: The Hasidic Conquest of Polish Jewish Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 26–41, 106–14, 167–68, 179–94; Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Kotzk: In Gerangl far Emesdikeit* [Kotzk: In struggle for truthfulness] (Tel Aviv: Hamenorah, 1973), vol. 2, chap. 11, 383–425; Tzvi Meir Rabinovitch, *Bein Pshiskhe LeLublin* [Between Pshiskhe and Lublin] (Jerusalem: Kesharim Publications, 1997), 293–369; Alan Brill, “Grandeur and Humility in the Writings of R. Simhah Bunim of Przysucha,” in *Hazon Nahum: Studies in Jewish Law, Thought and History Presented to Dr. Norman Lamm*, ed. Y. Elman and J. S. Gurock (New York: Ktav, 1997), 419–48; Hannah Kehat, *Mishe-hafkha Hatorah Letalmud Torah: Temurot Baidea shel Talmud Torah Ba'idan Hamoderni* [Since Torah became Talmud Torah: Changes in the concept of Torah study in the modern age] (Je-

whose primary ideal was the attainment of mystical experience (*devekut*),⁷ nineteenth-century Hasidism split and variegated into numerous groups,⁸ most of which discarded the original ideal and replaced it with what should be called “substitutes for mysticism.”⁹ The Pshiskhe-Kotzk version of Hasidism has sometimes been described, somewhat simplistically, as “existentialist,” and its notion that each person should develop his individual path to God was perceived as an ideal of “authenticity.”¹⁰ After Rabbi Bunem’s death, he was succeeded by Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Kotzk (1787–1859), and Leiner became his disciple.¹¹

The Kotzker carried his mentor’s teachings in certain areas to further extremes, making them even more demanding, while diverging from

rusalem: Carmel, 2016), 469–578. Uriel Gellman has recently proposed a more moderate interpretation of Rabbi Bunem, viewing his radical image as a later and not necessarily reliable construction: Uriel Gellman, *Hashevulim Hayotzim MiLublin: Tzemihatah shel Hahasidut BePolin* [The emergence of Hasidism in Poland] (Jerusalem: Shazar Center, 2018). His approach has been partly accepted by Tsippi Kaufman, “‘Vehineh BeKohelet Mahabil Hakol uveShir Hashirim hippukh mize’: Ledarko shel Reb Simha Bunem MiPshiskhe” [“In Ecclesiastes he takes everything as vanity, while in the Song of Songs he goes the opposite way”: On the path of Rebbe Simha Bunem of Pshiskhe], *Tarbiz* 82, no. 2 (2014): 335–72.

⁷ Gershom Scholem wrote about mysticism that “there are almost as many definitions to the term as there are writers on the subject.” Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken 1954), 3–4. In order to avoid extraneous semantic discussions, I clarify here that when using the term “mysticism,” I refer to an experience that was taken as the ideal at the outset of Hasidism, meaning an experience that reaches the point of a *Unio Mystica* experience, or “self-annihilation,” or, at the very least, to the point of what Gershom Scholem called “Intimate communion with God.” Gershom Scholem, “*Devekut*,’ or Communion with God,” in Gershon D. Hundert, *Essential Papers on Hasidism* (New York: NYU Press, 1991), 275.

⁸ Because of this process, nineteenth-century Hasidism was neglected by early scholars of Hasidism, who perceived it as a period of “waning” and “degeneration.” More recent studies, however, view it as the “golden age” of the movement. See, e.g., David Biale et al., *Hasidism: A New History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 259.

⁹ I developed and articulated this argument in a previous article: Benjamin Brown, “Substitutes for Mysticism: A General Model for the Theological Development of Hasidism in the Nineteenth Century,” *History of Religions* 56, no. 3 (2017): 247–88.

¹⁰ See, e.g., Rosen, *Quest for Authenticity*; Abraham Joshua Heschel, *A Passion for Truth* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1973), chap. 2, 85–116, and *Kotzk*, 13–18. I employ the term “existentialist” only to denote an accepted, not necessarily true, representation of R. Bunem and the Kotzker; I endorse Jerome Gellman’s critique of its use in a hasidic context: Jerome I. Gellman, “Hasidic Existentialism?,” in Elman and Gurock, *Hazon Nahum*, 393–417.

¹¹ The life and teaching of R. Menahem Mendel are wrapped in mystery. For a recent history and critical analysis of the descriptions of the Kotzker, see Morris Faienstein, *Truth Springs from the Earth: The Teachings of Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Kotzk* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2018), xii–xiv, 20–25. The Kotzker’s figure was romanticized already by his contemporary maskilim: Marcin Wodziński, *Haskalah and Hasidism in the Kingdom of Poland: A History of Conflict* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2005), 190–92. He did not leave any written works, and most of the information we have about him is from later sources, much of it hagiographic in nature. Some of these sources portray him as a stormy, demanding type of Jewish existentialist thinker: enthusiastic for “truth,” preaching self-scrutiny, “authenticity” and a demanding ongoing process of self-improvement. Abraham Joshua Heschel, who based much of his description on such sources, but developed his own interpretation of them, even compared him to Kierkegaard (see n. 10). This portrait has been challenged by some later

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R. Bunem's thought in other areas. The Kotzk hasidic court was known for its strict and forceful rebbe who tasked his disciples for a hasidic doctrine centered on "truth" (or "interiority"), "holiness," and constant striving for spiritual elevation. Indeed, hasidic literature is rife with allusions to the Kotzker's extreme demanding nature, but it seldom explains just how this demanding nature was translated into practice. A perusal of the Kotzker's collected dicta, though, suggests that his primary and most radical demand was that followers attain "holiness" (*kedushah*).¹² If we were to unpack this term, we would find that the Kotzker attached to it the meaning of "Sanctify yourself by that which is permitted to you"¹³ primarily as it applies to sexual relations in marriage.¹⁴ The Kotzker despised the corporeal and always sought to suppress it: this was, to a great extent, the primary manifestation of his demand for "spiritual elevation" and the reason he viewed everyone else as

scholars, notably Jacob S. Levinger, who believed that the main sources for the Kotzker's authentic sayings are the writings of his grandson, R. Shmuel Burnstein of Sokhatchov (Jacob S. Levinger, "Amarot authenticot shel haRebbe miKotzk" [Authentic dicta of the Kotzker Rebbe], *Tarbiz* 55, no. 1 [1986]: 109–35). However, Levinger himself admits that in those sayings "we cannot easily find something that makes the Kotzker special in contrast to his teachers, nor can we find any revolutionary tone in them" (121). In a later article, he allowed for a slightly more flexible methodology (Jacob S. Levinger, "Torato shel haRebbe miKotzk leor haamarot hameyuhasot lo 'al yedei nekhdo R. Shmuel of Sokhatchov" [The Kotzker Rebbe's teachings according to the dicta attributed to him by his grandson R. Shmuel of Sokhatchov], *Tarbiz* 55, no. 3 [1986]: 413–31), but, as Dror Bondi critically noted: "Even this narrow opening does not enable him [Levinger] to present the figure of the Kotzker Rebbe through six short and occasional points, that do not comprise a whole picture and do not add much color to the pale image portrayed in the purely scientific methodology." See Dror Bondi, "Petah Davar" [Introduction], in Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Kotzk: Bama'avak Lema'an Hayei Emet* [Kotzk: In the struggle for a life of truth; a translation of chaps. 1–8 of his Yiddish book cited above] (Jerusalem: Koren Publishers, 2015), n. 35, xxxi–xxxii. Levinger's approach was criticized, in various ways, by additional scholars, including Pinhas Sade, Michael Rosen and Hannah Kehat (see Bondi's summary and references, in his introduction to *Kotzk*, xxxii–xxxiii, and Faierstein, *Truth Springs from the Earth*, 23–25). My own approach is that the Kotzker should not be treated differently than other hasidic masters. The main sources for all the hasidic rebbes' sayings are the writings of their followers. Scholars do not completely refrain from using such sources, but they treat them in the way of "Respect them and suspect them." In other words, first-hand sources are preferable to second-hand and more distant sources; earlier sources are preferred over later ones; but even the less-preferred sources may be accepted if they do not serve a "political" purpose and do not contradict more reliable sources. Compare Immanuel Etkes, *The Beshit: Magician, Mystic and Leader* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2005), 1–6, 203–248; Itamar Eldar, "Mahapekhat Pshiskhe: R. Ya'akov Yitzhak Rabinovitch—Hayehudi Hakadosh—Biographia Vehagut" [The Pshiskhe Revolution: Rabbi Ya'akov Yitzhak Rabinovitch—"The Holy Jew"—biography and theology] (doctoral diss., Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University, 2017), 12–32. I also fully agree that dicta should be understood through text and context, as emphasized by Rosen, *Quest for Authenticity*, 297–98.

¹² Another supreme value in his thought was dedication to Torah study. This topic is discussed in most of the works cited above, in the previous footnote, as well as in Kehat, *Mishehakhah Hatorah Letalmud Torah*, 499–521.

¹³ BT *Yevamot* 20a. See below, n. 61.

¹⁴ For his approach to this-worldly concerns see, e.g., Heschel, *Kotzk*, chap. 7, 221–48, and *Passion for Truth*, 25–29; Faierstein, *Truth Springs from the Earth*, 59–60. While Heschel's analysis is fundamentally convincing, he seems to underestimate the centrality of the value of sexual abstinence in the Kotzker's teachings, as well as the scope of his demands. Heschel presents the

narrow-minded. He preached maximum abstinence in marital life, even going so far as to endorse withdrawing from involvement in the affairs of home and family. Apparently, he did not prescribe specific standards but rather demanded of each follower that he push his limits as far as possible.

The Kotzker also despised material comforts and worldly pleasures. He opposed compromise with oneself, creating an environment of constant challenges and continuous restlessness. Thus, contra to the conventional perceptions of the Kotzker (as an “existentialist” rebbe) he did not truly demand personal “authenticity”: after all, as rightly noted by Rachel Elijor, he himself charted the path and was the arbiter of absolute truth.¹⁵ His total disavowal of the departure of his disciple R. Mordekhai Yosef,¹⁶ is definitely not evidence that he acknowledged a person’s duty (or at least right) to choose his individual path to God. The demand for “truth” and “interiority” should also be understood quite differently than it has been thus far, as contempt for social conventions and as blind obedience to the rebbe’s single truth. The Kotzker scorned the masses knocking at his door, and he abused his students and sharply rebuked them for their weaknesses.¹⁷

According to the testimony of his grandson, Rabbi Mordekhai Yosef spent thirteen years at the Kotzk court, during which he grew increasingly dissatisfied with R. Mendel’s leadership. Many years later, his grandson compared this period of his life to the time David spent in the cave of Adullam before emerging to claim his crown.¹⁸ In 1839, on the eve of Simhat Torah, Leiner hosted a “tish” in the Kotzk court, symbolizing his assumption of leadership. A few days later he led a select group of the Kotzker rebbe’s students who had similar reservations about his leadership and left Kotzk. Soon thereafter he set up his own court in the distant town of Izbica. The Kotzker subsequently began a gradual process of seclusion and withdrawal from his public leadership role, while Rabbi Mordekhai Yosef warmly embraced his public role and began giving homilies to his disciples. These homilies were eventually collected in his famous book, *Mei Hashiloah*.¹⁹ The growing number of Izbicer hasidic followers, including former disciples of the Kotzker, riled supporters of the Kotzk court. Indeed, the Gur hasidim, who saw themselves

Kotzker’s sayings on this topic as reflecting mainly the standard he set for himself, while at least some of these sayings clearly reflect his demands from his followers as well.

¹⁵ Elijor, “Temurot bamahshava hadatit bahasidut Polin,” 405–9.

¹⁶ Heschel, *Kotzk*, 2:562–64.

¹⁷ Heschel, *Kotzk*, 2:505–12, 544–45.

¹⁸ Rabbi Gershon Henekh Leiner, introduction to *Mei Hashiloah* II, 3a. See Samuel 1, 22:1.

¹⁹ It should be noted that these homilies were originally delivered orally in Yiddish and transcribed by his followers in Hebrew, or possibly in Yiddish. The man who collected them and prepared them for print was R. Gershon Henekh, and we have no way of knowing how involved he was in translating and editing the original texts. Indeed, it should be noted that recently scholarship has become more aware of the gaps between original homilies in Yiddish and their printed Hebrew versions, particularly in the wake of the thorough research by Reiser and Mayse on this subject: Daniel Reiser and Ariel Evan Mayse, “Drashato haaharonah

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as a continuation of the Kotzker and eventually became the largest hasidic group in Poland, continued their antagonistic relations with the Izbica court for decades (the Gur court was founded in 1859, years after Leiner's passing). Rabbi Mordekhai Yosef Leiner died in 1854 and was succeeded by his son, Rabbi Ya'akov Leiner (1814–78).²⁰

The Izbicer's collected homilies, *Mei Hashiloah*, was published posthumously. The first volume came out in 1860 and created an immediate uproar.²¹ Additional volumes were published in 1922. The Izbicer's ideas also appear in the works of his disciples, most famously Rabbi Tzadok Hakohen Rabinowitz of Lublin (1823–1900). These were collected in later edited volumes.²²

Leiner's teachings were never written out as a cohesive doctrine but rather as a collection of sayings in a variety of circumstances, written down by his disciples. These sayings contain many contradictions, yet they also

shel haRebbe miGur Ba'al Sfat Emet umashma'ut sefat haYiddish leheker hadrashah hasidit" [The last homily of the R. Yehudah Arye Leib of Ger and the significance of the Yiddish language to the study of hasidic homilies], *Kabbalah* 30 (2013): 127–60; Daniel Reiser and Ariel Evan Mayse, "Sefer 'Sfat Emet', Yiddish manuscripts and the oral homilies of R. Yehudah Aryeh Leib of Ger," *Kabbalah* 33 (2015): 9–43; Daniel Reiser and Ariel Evan Mayse, "Second Thoughts: Unknown Yiddish Texts and New Perspectives on the Study of Hasidism," *Zutot* 14 (2017): 88–98. Also see Arthur Green, "On Translating Hasidic Homilies," *Prooftexts* 3, no. 1 (1983): 63–72. However, as long as we have no trace of the Yiddish original, we must rely on the Hebrew texts. Indeed, even if we did have the Yiddish text, it could not transmit to us the original "pure" homily (the "urtext" as it is called by Reiser and Mayse), since this was an oral talk, and the follower who set it down to paper necessarily abridged and edited it from memory. We must, therefore, trust in the printed text at hand, as is usually the case for the study of hasidic thinkers. All the same, two important points must be made here: first, Reiser and Mayse compared the Yiddish version of the Sfat Emet's homilies with their printed version, and following an in depth analysis I did not find there to be great differences in content and meaning of his central thoughts—the differences were more in style and tone. Even if this particular case is not indicative of the whole, it does assuage somewhat our fear of linguistic differences, especially since we have yet to happen upon the opposite case; one in which the linguistic gap had a real effect on the content. The above researchers have often noted that it is in fact the printed version that might ultimately be more reliable. Second, we find in the thought of R. Mordekhai Yosef a particular fixed vocabulary which is rather unique. Since his own son and grandson did not often use this vocabulary in their own independent writings, we have good reason to suppose that the texts at hand reflect rather reliably R. Mordekhai Yosef's original homilies.

²⁰ R. Ya'akov is often considered as less radical than his father, but since the father was probably much less radical than is commonly accepted (as I will demonstrate below), the son should be considered as more faithful to his teachings. On R. Ya'akov's theology, see Wiskind-Elper, *Wisdom of the Heart*.

²¹ Ben-Dor, "'Iyun Bemei Hashiloah," 6–7. In his memoirs, Yehezkel Kotik recalls his shock at the famous sermon about Zimri, which he read in the book of an Izbicer hasid employed by his father. It was this shock that led him to abandon Hasidism when he came of age. Yehezkel Kotik, *Mah Sheraiti: Zikhronotav shel Yehezkel Kotik* [What I have seen: The memoirs of Yehezkel Kotik], ed. David Assaf (Tel-Aviv: TAU Press, 1998), 295–96.

²² For example, Abraham Yehoshua Heschel Frenkel, *Mei Tzedek* (Brooklyn, NY: Author's publication, 1984); Yehudah Y. Spiegelman and Elhanan R. Goldhaber, *Likkutei Mei Hashiloah* (Bnei Brak: Izbica-Radzyn Institute, 2005).

reveal a much more systematic mode of thought than one finds for most hasidic leaders; the Izbicer revisited certain topics from multiple angles and developed a specific set terminology for his discussions.²³ The main themes of his thought are summarized below, following the outlines of the existing scholarly literature.

The foundation of the Izbicer's doctrine is the notion of God's will. The divine will encompasses the entire world and nothing can exist or occur without it. Man's actions, speech, and even thoughts are all determined by heaven.²⁴ Man's nature is determined by heaven and thus his flaws are heaven-sent as well.²⁵ Man may be under the impression that he is exercising free will, but he was in fact made to feel this way because God wishes him to make every effort. God's existence is the only reality, and, therefore, he determines all of man's actions. This may not be how world appears to us; it may appear to exist independently, but that is because we are only able to perceive the world's superficial layer—its “hue” or “garment”—and are unable to see its reality—its “depth.” God's will is concealed in our world.

God's will is not confined to the existing world but also contains a normative aspect: God wishes for a certain person to do something specific or act in a certain manner under certain circumstances. God's will was revealed in the Torah, and this provided the “rules,” that is, the halakhic commandments. But our surrounding reality, with all that occurs in it, is laden with divine messages that also convey God's normative will.²⁶ Unfortunately, that will is hidden to us here as well, and we are at best able to apprehend its “hues” rather than its “depth.” Thus, for example, when a person identified a certain deficiency (*hisaron*) in himself, it was undoubtedly placed there by God's will; but what does God's normative will demand in this respect? Did God plant this deficiency in order for him to overcome it, or the opposite, so that he is “defeated” by it? Ostensibly, a deficiency (that is, an inclination to sin) would most likely imply that God wishes the person to overcome it. But, what about impulses that cannot be overcome through the greatest of efforts? In such cases, it is likely that God wills the person to be “defeated” by the forces implanted in him; but perhaps man can, in fact, overcome this

²³ In the following paragraphs, some of the Izbicer's commonly used terms are presented in quotation marks.

²⁴ For a discussion of the Izbicer's contradictory statements on this issue and an attempt to resolve them, see Hefter “In God's Hands,” 46–64.

²⁵ For a discussion of the Izbicer's concept of human deficiencies see Faienstein, *All Is in the Hands of Heaven*, 55–57.

²⁶ This should be compared to other hasidic thinkers who pondered the relationship between the Law and other aspects of divine will. For some thorough discussions of the topic see Yehoshua Mondshine, “The Fluidity of Categories in Hasidism: ‘Averah lishmah’ in the Teachings of R. Zevi Elimelekh of Dynow,” in *Hasidism Reappraised*, ed. Ada Rapoport-Albert (London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1996), 301–20; Ariel Evan Mayse, “The Ever-Changing Path: Visions of Legal Diversity in Hasidic Literature,” *Conversations* 23 (2015): 84–115; Maoz Kahana and Ariel Evan Mayse, “Hasidic Halakhah: Reappraising the Interface of Spirit and Law,” *AJS Review* 41, no. 2 (November 2017): 375–408, esp. at 397–407.

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deficiency, and it is merely his “biases” (*negi’ot*: the forces stemming from man’s desires and distorting his rational judgment)²⁷ that lead him to choose the easy path and blame God’s will? This conundrum keeps man in a constant state of doubt.

The Izbicer does not shy away from this doubt, which he views as the believer’s fundamental state of existence. He calls for man to constantly strive to understand God’s will, even when it is concealed. He presents two main types of religiosity: one type, embodied by the biblical Joseph and by the tribe of Ephraim who followed in his footsteps, does not search for God’s will in lived reality but rather is satisfied with acting in accordance to the “rules”; the other type of religiosity, embodied by the biblical Judah and the entire tribe of Judah, seeks to understand the “depth” of God’s will in all its manifestations, above and beyond the “rules.” Indeed, this search (*berur*, often translated as “clarification” or “self-scrutiny”) sometimes leads one to the conclusion that the essence of God’s will contradicts such “rules.” The Izbicer did not shy away from the obvious consequent conclusion: “this matter will sometimes demand action that contradicts Halakhah.”²⁸ And if this provocative declaration was not enough, the Izbicer suggests, using thinly veiled hints, that one indication that a specific act is the will of God is the fact that a person feels an uncontrollable urge to commit that specific act. Such an urge, if the person can honestly determine that it cannot be overcome, is no other than an expression of God’s will implanted in that person. The clearest expression of this position is found in the Izbicer’s thoughts on the “beautiful woman” (Deut. 21:10–14): “sometimes, man’s impulses overcome him to the point where he is unable to move under any circumstance, and then it is clear that this is by God, as found in Judah.”²⁹ This section reveals the secret of Judah’s paradigmatic character: one way of knowing whether a certain force is derived from God’s will is simply the fact that man feels that this force is more powerful than he—even in the case of sexual desire! Indeed, the Izbicer’s central discussion of Judah actually pertains to the story of Judah and Tamar, in which Judah transgressed sexually.

Leiner is empathetic and understanding of the types who wish to avoid doubt and stick to the safety of the “rules” but seems to sympathize primarily with the other type, those who face doubts head-on. The first approach is

²⁷ *Negi’ot* is difficult to translate. It comes from the expression *noge’a badavar*, that is, someone who has an interest or is otherwise biased regarding the matter at stake (and therefore is unreliable concerning it). “Biases” is probably the closest translation.

²⁸ *Mei Hashiloah*, I, Vayeshev, 15a. For further comparisons of Judah and Joseph, and of the tribe of Judah with the tribe of Ephraim (descended from Joseph), see *Mei Hashiloah*, I, Vezot Haberah, 66d; *Mei Hashiloah*, II, Tetzaveh, 18c; *Mei Hashiloah*, I, Shemot, 19b; *Mei Hashiloah*, II, Tisa, 19c–d; *Mei Hashiloah*, II, Beha’alotkha, 29c–d; *Mei Hashiloah*, II, Psalms, 49a–b; *Mei Hashiloah*, III, Vayigash, 69a–b. This same topic was also studied by Faienstein, Ben-Dor, Cohen, Elior, and others: see n. 2 above.

²⁹ *Mei Hashiloah*, I, Ki Tetze, 62a.

rooted in fear-of-God and humility, and it is seen by Leiner as a “contraction” or “self-narrowing” (*tzimtzum*) approach; the second approach is rooted in love for God, and is viewed by Leiner as an expression of “expansion” (*hitpashtut*).³⁰ Both terms are borrowed from the Kabbalah, where they refer to the divine light emanating onto the world, but Leiner here applies them to mankind. In the future, he promises, the “expansive” approach will persevere, since God’s will shall no longer be hidden, but open and accessible to all.

Three main innovations have thus been identified by scholars in the thought of the Izbicer: (a) his “religious determinism,” that is, his bold denial of free will,³¹ a hasidic version of the doctrine of predestination; (b) the constant doubt regarding the “depth” of God’s will as opposed to its visible “hues”;³² and, most important, (c) “legitimization of transgressions”: The Izbicer’s supposedly “bold” and “antinomian” call to diverge from Halakhah when a person is certain that this is “the depth of God’s will.”³³ It is this final element of Leiner’s thought that we focus on in the discussion below.

THE IZBICER’S ANTINOMIANISM: TEXTUAL AND CONTEXTUAL ISSUES

Several scholars have already objected to the characterization of Leiner’s theology as fully antinomian. Shaul Magid has described the Izbicer’s approach as “soft antinomianism,” because he does not disqualify religious law in its entirety but rather suspends it under certain circumstances, usually extraordinary ones.³⁴ Furthermore, nearly all scholars of the Izbicer have noted that he set conditions for actions that contravene the Halakhah: such actions are permitted as an exception rather than the rule,³⁵ and only a man who has transcended his personal “biases” may be certain that he is not being misled by his heart. Nonetheless, scholars usually believe that, even within these limitations, the Izbicer opens the door to deviations from Halakhah. This, in and of itself, is enough to consider him a “bold” thinker who challenges the supremely nomic Jewish tradition.

We find, however, such an interpretation faulty on a number of levels: textually, it tends to minimize the value and validity of the conditions for deviating from the Halakhah; contextually, that is, historically, it tends to overlook the simple fact that there is not a single shred of evidence of deviations

³⁰ See Seeman, “Martyrdom, Emotion and the Work of Ritual,” 261–69.

³¹ Weiss, “Torat hadeterminism”; Morris Faienstein, “The Deterministic Theology of Rabbi Mordecai Joseph Leiner of Izbica,” *Proceedings of the Rabbinical Assembly of America* 51 (1990): 186–96.

³² Elior, “Temurot bamahshava hadatit bahasidut Polin”; Ben-Dor, “‘Iyun Bemei Hashiloah”; Cohen, “Toda’ah ‘Atzmit Besefer Mei Hashiloah.”

³³ This is common to most of the scholars mentioned in n. 2 above.

³⁴ Magid, *Hasidism on the Margin*, 215–16

³⁵ See, e.g., *Mei Hashiloah*, II, 25a.

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from Halakhah in the Izbica hasidic court, be it among its successive rebbes or among its followers.³⁶ These two points should be elaborated.

First, the textual aspect: Leiner discusses the limitations on deviating from Halakhah numerous times, and these limitations are, furthermore, extremely strict, to the point that they leave no opening for actual deviations in the real world. Thus, for example, the Izbicer determines that true insight into the will of God is possible only when the person has no relationship to the matter at hand,³⁷ when he is completely free of desires,³⁸ and when he can derive no pleasure from the deviation from Halakhah.³⁹ If the desire anticipates the thought of committing the act, “then the act requires self-scrutiny (*berur*), since perhaps the desire emerged out of some bias (*negi'ah*) caused by a worldly delight.”⁴⁰ In another, somewhat opaque text, he reiterates that when a man brings himself into a position where he is “affected” in favor of the deviation, he is incapable addressing God’s will, and furthermore, warns that in such a case the man would be doubly responsible for the sin.⁴¹ In some of the texts, the Izbicer stipulates explicitly that the path of expansion (*hitpashtut*) may not be taken until the person at stake adopts the opposite qualities of fear-of-God and humility.⁴² In yet another place, he is even more exacting, determining that only when a person is “perfect” is he allowed to worship God through “expansion”; only then he is guaranteed to be fulfilling God’s will in all his actions.⁴³

A sin for the sake of heaven, the Izbicer elaborates, can be sacred only if it is acceptable both in the eyes of God and of men.⁴⁴ Similarly, he warns that “a man must not think himself clever enough to transgress against the laws of the Torah even by a hair, and he should see that he also appears innocent in the eyes of people.”⁴⁵ Moreover, transgressing for heaven’s sake is appropriate for certain specific individuals, while halakhic law is the well-trodden path intended for the masses. Thus, even when the act of transgression is aligned with God’s will, it should be avoided so as not to mislead others who may not be worthy of this path.⁴⁶

If all this is not enough, the Izbicer mentions elsewhere that a man wishing to act in accordance with *hitpashtut* “must hold himself” from doing so,⁴⁷

³⁶ This fact was pointed out by Allan Nadler in his review of Shaul Magid, *Hasidism on the Margin*, in the *Jewish Quarterly Review* 96, no. 2 (Spring 2006): 281. See also Hefter, “In God’s Hands,” 50.

³⁷ *Mei Hashiloah*, II, Beha’alotkha, 28c; *Mei Hashiloah*, I, Hukkat, 52a–c.

³⁸ *Mei Hashiloah*, I, Tetzaveh, 29b–c.

³⁹ *Mei Hashiloah*, I, Lekha, 7c–d.

⁴⁰ *Mei Hashiloah*, I, Yitro, 25d.

⁴¹ *Mei Hashiloah*, III, Bo, 69b–c.

⁴² *Mei Hashiloah*, I, Berakhot, 9c–10a. Also *Mei Hashiloah*, I, Shelah, 49d.

⁴³ *Mei Hashiloah*, I, Noah, 5b–c.

⁴⁴ *Mei Hashiloah*, I, Shelah, 49c.

⁴⁵ *Mei Hashiloah*, I, Shelah, 49d–50a.

⁴⁶ *Mei Hashiloah*, I, Vayera, 9c–d.

⁴⁷ *Mei Hashiloah*, I, Noah, 5c.

and in yet another place he simply states that this path is not at all suitable to our times, since “nowadays . . . one cannot reach the depth of God’s will through any way other than the Torah and commandments.”⁴⁸ Indeed, a large portion of the Izbicer’s discussions of “holy sins” are in fact explications for the actions of biblical heroes and righteous leaders of the distant past.

Which leads us to the historical context. The fact that there is no historical evidence of halakhic transgressions by Izbica’s rebbes or their followers cannot be seen as mere happenstance. In such cases, we cannot simply say that the fact that “we haven’t seen is not evidence” (*Mishnah, Eduyoth* 2:2). As noted, the Izbicer hasidim were engaged in bitter rivalry with the Kotzk court, and later also with the powerful Gur hasidim, who undoubtedly were “lying in wait for them,” grasping at any act that might justify their denunciation. If such acts had occurred, and even there were merely rumors of such acts, the Izbica’s enemies certainly would have used them in their propaganda. The silence in this respect is a clear sign of the absence of such acts.

The above paints a rather “dull” picture of the hasidic court in Izbica: no “boldness,” no deviations from the Halakhah; rather, it was an established group listening to *Verter* (hasidic homilies) on elevated figures from the distant past who sought God’s will and in exceptional cases allowed themselves to deviate—a privilege reserved for people of their spiritual stature. In other words, the Izbicer hasidim cannot be characterized as a group following “soft antinomianism”; rather, they are characterized by neutralized antinomianism or, as I have suggested above, theoretical antinomianism. If this is the indeed the case, the question arises: Why did the Izbicer rebbe dwell on this topic so much, and what was the purpose of his homilies on the subject?

This brings us back to my question about theoretical antinomianism: What is its purpose? What is the point of antinomian expressions if they are immediately neutralized? To state this more bluntly: Why would one write “You may, and sometimes even should, be a bad boy, but only if you are smarter than Einstein, more benevolent than Mother Theresa, and funnier than Charlie Chaplin” rather than simply stating “be a good boy”?⁴⁹ There are a number of possible answers to this question: Sometimes it is an expression of adherence to a radical tradition even when it has transitioned into a nomic one (this is one of the possible explanations for the existence of theoretical antinomianism among Hungarian rabbis);⁵⁰ In other

⁴⁸ *Mei Hashiloah*, I, Hukkat, 51d–52a.

⁴⁹ Indeed, we know of many cases in which religious authorities wanted to keep certain principles on paper while restricting their applicability to the minimum. Thus, for example, the sages of the Talmud preserved the biblical laws of capital punishment but minimized their applicability through an almost impossible bar of evidence required for conviction. But in that case, as in most other similar cases, the Sages had the law before them, and they had to minimize its applicability through legal qualifications. This is not the case with the Izbicer, who was not under any “duress” to discuss the question or even to raise the issue in the first place.

⁵⁰ See Benjamin Brown, “The Two Faces of Religious Radicalism: Orthodox Zealotry and ‘Holy Sinning’ in Nineteenth-Century Hasidism in Hungary and Galicia,” *Journal of Religion* 93, no. 3 (2013): 341–74.

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cases, it might be a means of stirring up spiritual agitation; and sometimes a means of justifying the sins of one's forbearers and establishing their holiness. Additional explanations abound.

In this specific case, the question should be answered at two levels: the particular, relating the specific circumstances of the Izbica hasidic court; and the universal, relating to theoretical antinomianism in general. At the particular level, I argue that theoretical antinomianism enabled the consistency of "following through" on the Izbicer's hasidic path, which developed to a great extent in response to the Kotzker tradition. At the universal level, I wish to argue, following Joseph Weiss, that theoretical antinomianism is in fact a utopian phenomenon and should be understood within the broader context of utopianism.⁵¹

THE PARTICULAR LEVEL: THE IZBICER'S THEORETICAL ANTINOMIANISM AS A RESPONSE TO KOTZK

Existing scholarly literature appears to be overly focused on the "radical" and "bold" aspects of the Izbicer's thought and, therefore, tended to neglect other aspects that might illuminate his approach and, specifically, his personality. Contextually, the existing scholarship has not paid enough attention, in my opinion, to the issue of the relationship between the Izbicer and the Kotzker, or to the Izbicer's character as a leader and person.⁵² Textually, I refer primarily to the Izbicer's "ethic," and in particular to the part of his theology that addresses the desirable and undesirable qualities of the human personality.⁵³ These can better illuminate the Izbicer's doctrine as a whole and account for his allegedly radical expressions.

The thirteen years Rabbi Mordekhai Yosef Leiner spent at the court of the Kotzker rebbe were undoubtedly a difficult time that left him bitter. His desertion from the Kotzker's court and the subsequent harassment by Kotzker hasidim were probably also traumatic.⁵⁴ Consequently, it is worthwhile considering to what extent one can explain the Izbicer's doctrine as a reaction to that of the Kotzker rebbe. Certainly, the styles of leadership with which they led their respective hasidic courts were immensely different. While the Kotzker rebbe rebuked his students and berated them for slacking in their efforts at "elevation," the Izbicer is depicted as an amenable, welcoming man who offered his disciples comfort and support.⁵⁵

The Kotzker's approach to attaining holiness entailed, as noted, the imposition of strict norms in all that pertains to abstinence from worldly plea-

⁵¹ Weiss, *Studies in Eastern European Jewish Mysticism*, 209–48.

⁵² One notable exception, as mentioned, is Faierstein's article, "Kotsk-Izbica Dispute."

⁵³ Important exceptions in this respect are Heschel, Faierstein, and Seeman.

⁵⁴ The Izbica tradition tries to play down the acuteness of the rift and the tensions that followed it: R. Yeruham Leiner, *Tiferet Yeruham* (Brooklyn, NY: Deutsch, 1968), 149.

⁵⁵ See description below, at the end of this section, near footnotes 122–24.

tures. He preached avoiding the pleasure of eating, the quest for money, and, most importantly perhaps, sexual congress. David Biale described him as “perhaps the most extreme ascetic in the whole history of Hasidism.”⁵⁶ Even if there were other hasidic leaders who equaled or surpassed him in austerity, the Kotzker nonetheless features on the list of the most abstemious figures in Hasidism. Several of his injunctions on the subject were collected in later posthumous works ascribing such quotes. As is usual in hasidic thought, most of them build on verses but not on their plain meaning: “Thou shalt not commit adultery” says the verse, and Rashi explains: “adultery is said only about [intercourse with] a married woman.” The Kotzker gave his own interpretation to Rashi’s comment: “about the woman married to the person himself” (namely, his wife).⁵⁷ Interpreting Jacob’s words to Laban (Gen. 31:40) in a nonliteral fashion, he states that man’s religious achievements in the day depend on his being “[as] ice at night.” The verse says: “When a man shall sanctify his house to be holy unto the Lord . . .” (Lev. 27:14). The Kotzker interpreted the verse as follows: “A man is called holy only when his house [= marital life] is sanctified.”⁵⁸ One of the Kotzker’s grandsons testified that he saw an inscription quoting his grandfather to have said: “The Torah portion *Kedoshim* [Lev. 19, 1–20, 27] begins with the words ‘Ye shall be holy’ and ends with the words ‘their bloods are upon them.’ [This means:] May it cost you with blood, but be holy.” The “bloods” mentioned here insinuate not only the highest degree of sacrifice but also, almost certainly, to the term “boiling of the blood” [*retihat hadamim*] that in rabbinic literature indicates the inflammation of sexual desires.⁵⁹ The Torah’s permission to marry the captive “beautiful woman” (Deut. 21:10–14), which the sages interpreted as an outlet for the evil inclination, was reinterpreted by the Kotzker as room for the man to show that he overcomes his evil inclination out of his own choice, even when the Torah does not mandate it.⁶⁰

These hyper-halakhic norms, which are not part of the positive law of Halakhah, are defined in rabbinic terms as “stringencies,” “fences,” “safeguards,” or “pietistic virtues” (*humrot*, *gedarim*, *syagim*, or *midat hasidut*). They are often justified using the classical line of reasoning, based on the Midrash for the verse “Ye shall be holy” (Lev. 19:2), whereby the verse means “Sanctify yourself in what is permitted to you.”⁶¹ The Izbicer’s position regarding

⁵⁶ Biale, *Eros and the Jews* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 130. Biale adds in a footnote that “Ger Hasidism, which derived from Kotzk, lacks this ascetic element” (273 n. 30). This is certainly not true for the days of the Beys Yisroel and onward.

⁵⁷ R. Menahem Mendel Morgenstern of Kotzk, *Emet Veemunah*, ed. R. Yisrael Ya’akov Araten (Jerusalem: Shem ’Olam by the Amshinov Yeshiva, 2005), par. 612.

⁵⁸ Morgenstern, *Emet Veemunah*, par. 895.

⁵⁹ Morgenstern, *Emet Veemunah*, par. 812.

⁶⁰ Morgenstern, *Emet Veemunah*, par. 809.

⁶¹ BT *Yevamot*, 20a. This instruction is well known thanks to Nachmanides’s commentary on Leviticus 19:2.

these hyper-halakhic norms is not clear, because of the seeming contradictions in his thought, but it appears in general to have been negative.

As a rule, Leiner does not necessarily perceive “holiness” to refer to the holiness that a person achieves by his deeds, but also, and perhaps primarily, to the holiness of the People of Israel by virtue of their very being and relationship to God.⁶² Nevertheless, the Izbicer speaks positively of “Sanctify yourself in what is permitted to you” in several places,⁶³ and even pronounces that going beyond the letter of the law is an expression of love for God.⁶⁴ When a person vows to accept the “fences and safeguards,” he thereby completes the Torah and all of creation, “as if he had become God’s partner in the act of genesis.”⁶⁵ According to the Izbicer, the fences and safeguards assist man in following God’s laws, and anyone who does not accept any fences or safeguards is called a “scorner” (*letz*).⁶⁶ In contrast, when a man guards himself from desires, God dwells in him always.⁶⁷ When a man wishes to enter a place harboring spiritual danger, he should guard himself against dangerous qualities (anger, lust) or, alternately, set comprehensive safeguards.⁶⁸

Alongside this advocacy for fences and safeguards that a person accepts freely in order to avoid transgressions, *Mei Hashiloah* also contains quite a few expressions of reservation. Fences, according to Leiner, are not the essence of the Torah.⁶⁹ One can and one should attempt to attain holiness by following the Halakhah and its “fences” (probably referring to regular halakhic law rather than to hyper-halakhic norms), but even if one fails to attain it in this manner, one still contains the holiness imbued in him by God’s will, which promises a Jew that he will purify his heart.⁷⁰ The above indicates that, according to the Izbicer, the principle “sanctify yourself in what is permitted to you” does not require abstinence from the worldly pleasures permitted by Halakhah but rather that they be indulged “with temperance (*yishuv hadaa’at*)”⁷¹ rather than impulsively.⁷² Furthermore, according

⁶² *Mei Hashiloah*, I, Vayetze, 12a–b; *Mei Hashiloah*, I, Mas’ei, 55c–d; *Mei Hashiloah*, I, ’Ekev, 59a.

⁶³ See, e.g., *Mei Hashiloah*, II, Kiddushin, 63c–d; *Mei Hashiloah*, II, Shemini, 24b.

⁶⁴ *Mei Hashiloah*, I, Beshalah, 24c.

⁶⁵ *Mei Hashiloah*, I, Matot, 54d–55a; also *Mei Hashiloah*, I, 55b.

⁶⁶ *Mei Hashiloah*, I, Psalms, 3c.

⁶⁷ *Mei Hashiloah*, II, Kedoshim, 25c.

⁶⁸ *Mei Hashiloah*, II, Mas’ei, 33c. Elsewhere, however, the Izbicer stipulates that man should not test himself at all and should never knowingly put himself in spiritual danger, even if it is for the sake of honoring heaven. *Mei Hashiloah*, II, Yitro, 16c.

⁶⁹ *Mei Hashiloah*, I, Bo, 22a–b.

⁷⁰ *Mei Hashiloah*, I, Kedoshim, 38d.

⁷¹ The Hebrew term *Yeshuv hada’at*—a key concept in the Izbicer’s doctrine—is difficult to translate. Fairstein suggested “calm and careful consideration” (*All Is in the Hands of Heaven*, 2, 87) and Seeman used “cognitive and emotional equanimity” (“Martyrdom, Emotion and the Work of Ritual,” 266). See his in-depth analysis of this concept.

⁷² *Mei Hashiloah*, I, Kedoshim, 38c. Likewise, also see *Mei Hashiloah*, II, Psalms, 49d. A late and hostile source tells us about his objection to the common hasidic custom of not eating *Gebrochts* (a matzah cooked with water) during Passover: Avraham Yissakhar Binyamin Alter, *Meir Einei Hagolah* (Piotrkow: Fullman, 1928), I, article 235 (pp. 33a/65).

to the Izbicer, the people of Israel wished to achieve a state in which “they could expand (*hitpashlut*) to all they desire and have no need for fences and safeguards,” and God instructed them that if they were to look to the “Giver”—that is, God himself, he who enables them to achieve this state—then “you will be permitted to expand to all pleasures from above, and still everything will be [done] in holiness.”⁷³ (Note that even when enjoying all the pleasures of the world it is possible to attain holiness.) As a rule, the Izbicer awaits the time and circumstances where fences and safeguards will no longer be necessary.⁷⁴ He sometimes phrased this even more radically: someone who restricts himself without understanding the purpose is “a fool,”⁷⁵ and furthermore, strictness where it is not necessary could ultimately lead to a violation of the prohibition “Thou shalt not add thereto”⁷⁶ (which, according to conventional rabbinic interpretations, is a prohibition against adding further laws beyond those written in the Torah or derived from it). Leiner interprets the verse “a perverse and crooked generation” (Deut. 32:5) to refer to what he sees as two deviations from the right path: “Perverse is one who persists against God and does not follow the will of God because he is constantly indulging his own pleasures; and crooked is the opposite, [one] who adopts ascetic practices and altogether unnecessary restrictive norms, and one who tortures himself too much, which is also a transgression, as is said: ‘he that is cruel troubleth his own flesh’ [Prov. 11:17].”⁷⁷ Indeed, in the eyes of the Izbicer, those who torture themselves too much and those who transgress for the sake of bodily pleasure are equally guilty. This rebuke certainly could have been aimed at the Kotzker rebbe. And if this wasn’t clear enough, the Izbicer is even more explicit elsewhere—denigrating both those who “spare” their body too much and those who torture it, noting that: “the righteous man who denies his body worldly pleasures, is called someone who is not on the path to God.”⁷⁸

⁷³ *Mei Hashiloah*, I, Shoftim, 61c–d.

⁷⁴ *Mei Hashiloah*, I, Beshalah, 23d–24a.

⁷⁵ *Mei Hashiloah*, I, Shoftim, 36d.

⁷⁶ *Mei Hashiloah*, II, Shemini, 24a.

⁷⁷ *Mei Hashiloah*, I, Haazinu, 65c. The Izbicer refers here to the Midrash on this verse: regarding Hillel we found that when he wanted to better his body, he said that he was going to reward the kindness of his lodgings, and explained that the body is the lodgings of the soul. In support of this he quoted the above verse from Proverbs. Midrash Leviticus Rabbah 34:3. It is also presented in the context of the Talmudic debate over the nature of the Nazirite: “R. Eleazar explains that he is termed sinner, that is because he defiled himself . . . Resh Lakish says: He is termed pious [and termed cruel], as it is said: The pious man weans his own soul but is cruel . . . R. Jeremiah b. Abba said that Resh Lakish said: A scholar may not afflict himself by fasting because he lessens thereby his heavenly work.” BT *Ta’anit* 11a–11b. Addition in square brackets is my own, following the suggestion of the Maharsha.

⁷⁸ *Mei Hashiloah*, I, Hagigah, 20c–214. Elsewhere R. Leiner qualifies this and argues that rejecting the pleasures of this world is a sin, but that when this is aimed at revealing God’s true will, it is a good quality, attributed to Joseph. *Mei Hashiloah*, II, Naso, 28a–b. See also Heschel’s discussion (*Kotzk*, 2:643–46), which focuses on the Izbicer’s opposition to *humras* (stringent or restrictive norms).

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The Izbicer's various declarations for and against fences and safeguards are not necessarily contradictory. A number of sources reveal that the Izbicer believed that at the beginning of man's journey, and especially when "desire is strong in him,"⁷⁹ he must adopt the path of "fear-of-God" and "restriction" (*tzimtzum*), which entails total obedience to the rules of Halakhah, and sometimes even hyper-halakhic fences and safeguards.⁸⁰ At this stage the fences and safeguards are an expression of virtue, since the individual determines them in accordance to his personal spiritual character, that is, with intention to God's will that is focused on him⁸¹ (although there is a certain amount of ambiguity here as well, since this stage is usually characterized by a lack of clarity as to the will of God).⁸² However, as one progresses in one's worship of God to the stage where one is completely pure and refined, one may adopt the path of *hitpashtut*, including exposure to worldly pleasures.⁸³ In the Izbicer's own words: "after you fence yourself in forcefully and resolutely, you shall be constrained on all sides and you will be allowed to expand yourself to everything you wish and you will need no fence."⁸⁴ At this advanced stage, pleasures are not forbidden because they are infused with the same holiness as the perfect man himself, and they are the will of God.⁸⁵ Now one may also abandon the fences and safeguards with which one constrained oneself, since they were only appropriate for the time and situation in which they were initially adopted.⁸⁶ Moreover, at this stage it is "good to be a little immersed in desire, rather than totally dry."⁸⁷ All the same, anyone familiar with the ways of the hasidim knows well that no one would dare declare that he had completed the process of purifying his soul, that he was completely free of all desires and *negi'ot*, and that he is capable of focusing himself entirely on the "depth of God's Will." The path of "expansion" (*hitpashtut*) remains here as well, mere "theoretical antinomianism."

Now we can proceed to unpack the Izbicer's "theory of doubt." Man is undoubtedly doomed to doubt, and doubt is often the difference between locating God's will through the "rules" and finding it above and beyond these rules. Scholars of the Izbicer have sought to identify this doubt with the existentialist feelings the path-seeking believer. In truth, however, the Izbicer's concept of doubt plays a different, much more conservative role. Doubt elicits constant self-suspicion, a fear that one's notions of God's will

⁷⁹ *Mei Hashiloah*, II, Matot, 33a–b.

⁸⁰ *Mei Hashiloah*, I, Matot, 54d–55a; *Mei Hashiloah*, I, 55b; and some of the sources in the following notes. See also Hefter, "In God's Hands," 65.

⁸¹ See, e.g., *Mei Hashiloah*, IV, Toldot, 73a–b. Sometimes the weakness is not individual, but collective: *Mei Hashiloah*, II, Kedoshim, 25d.

⁸² See, e.g., *Mei Hashiloah*, I, Shemini, 34a.

⁸³ *Mei Hashiloah*, II, Korah, 31a–d; *Mei Hashiloah*, I, Reeh, 59d–60a.

⁸⁴ *Mei Hashiloah*, I, Proverbs, 7b.

⁸⁵ As is apparent in *Mei Hashiloah*, I, Ruth, 1a; *Mei Hashiloah*, I, Proverbs, 6a–b.

⁸⁶ *Mei Hashiloah*, II, 33a.

⁸⁷ *Mei Hashiloah*, I, 64c–d.

are nothing but an illusion caused by one's biases (*negi'ot*) and that these notions ultimately lead one to follow the "rules"—traditional halakhic law. Indeed, the Izbicer repeatedly declared that in any situation where there is doubt, and even in a situation where there is no doubt but there should be, man is required to adhere to the qualities of fear-of-God and humility,⁸⁸ the very qualities of restriction (*tzimtzum*) and limiting expansion.

As demonstrated in the previous section, when it comes to immediate reality, the Izbicer does not approve of deviating from Halakhah; nor does he appear to be enthusiastic about "fences and guards," and certainly not about excessive sexual abstinence, as we have shown here. Abstinence is seen at most as a temporary means of dealing with a specific challenge, but Leiner generally rules out extreme asceticism. Ultimately, he supports the "middle road."⁸⁹ In practice, this means the traditional mainstream halakhic path. If one rules out "less than Halakhah" as well as "more than Halakhah," one is left with Halakhah.⁹⁰

The differences between the Izbicer and Kotzker are also apparent in their ethics. Although the Izbicer's principles in this realm are not always explicit, they are strongly suggested. As noted, the Kotzker used to rebuke his disciples forcefully and even aggressively in order to steer them onto the path to holiness and elevation.⁹¹ A perusal of *Mei Hashiloah* suggests that what the Kotzker's disciples saw as righteous wrath, the Izbicer saw as mere expressions of "anger," a quality he is most contemptuous of. The Izbicer opposes anger to *yishuv hada'at* (equanimity) or *nayha* (composure), that is, to patience, moderation and restraint.⁹²

Rabbi Leiner directs that one should be strict with oneself, but gentle with others.⁹³ Anger is a fault of the gentiles (whom the Izbicer is less than fond of),⁹⁴ while the virtue of Israel is that they are composed even when angry.⁹⁵

⁸⁸ For example, *Mei Hashiloah*, I, Beshalah, 22c–d; *Mei Hashiloah*, I, Tzav, 33a–b.

⁸⁹ *Mei Hashiloah*, II, 5c–6a.

⁹⁰ It is noteworthy that although Hefter relied on an analysis completely different from the methods of this article, he also reached the conclusion that "R. Mordechai Yosef is entirely loyal to traditional Jewish religious sensibilities. The theology of the MH infuses meaning into our mundane observance of the Torah and can actually serve as a basis for deepened commitment to Torah and consciousness of God in our religious experience" (Hefter, "In God's Hands," 45). See also Heschel, *Kotzk*, 2:642.

⁹¹ Heschel, *Kotzk*, 2:505–12.

⁹² He had expressed his support of self-possession and against anger multiple times. These are but a sample: *Mei Hashiloah*, I, Noah, 5a–c; *Mei Hashiloah*, I, Shemini, 34b–c; *Mei Hashiloah*, II, 'Ekev, 35d; *Mei Hashiloah*, II, Reeh, 36b. Sometimes "self-possession" is opposed not to anger but to over eagerness or hastiness: *Mei Hashiloah*, I, Beshalah, 24a; *Mei Hashiloah*, I, Shemini, 34b; *Mei Hashiloah*, I, Shemini, 34c. In some instances, though, haste is nonetheless permitted: *Mei Hashiloah*, I, Mishpatim, 27b; *Mei Hashiloah*, I Hoseas, 3a–b. See also Heschel, *Kotzk*, 560, 623–640; Faierstein, *All Is in the Hands of Heaven*, 85; Cohen, "Toda'ah 'Atzmit Besefer Mei Hashiloah," 108–11.

⁹³ *Mei Hashiloah*, II, *Ta'anit*, 62a.

⁹⁴ *Mei Hashiloah*, I, Shelah, 50a–b.

⁹⁵ *Mei Hashiloah*, II, Shoftim, 37a–b. Sometimes when they are angry, this anger is the outcome of holiness. *Mei Hashiloah*, II, Joshua, 43a–b.

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When a person feels anger or desire, he should not pray.⁹⁶ Even those who are unintentionally angry will be punished.⁹⁷ Even when one is forced into a dispute (a conflict), one must conduct oneself with moderation and patience.⁹⁸ The Izbicer even suggests a behaviorist solution in order to overcome anger: one should conduct oneself with grace, even toward those one is angry with, and thus gradually remove the anger from deep in one's heart.⁹⁹

Another important part of Leiner's ethics has to do with the relationship between anger and desire.¹⁰⁰ As noted, the Kotzker was focused on battling human desires—sexual, as well as for other earthly pleasures—and his “holy wrath” was employed primarily in pushing his disciples to transcend them. While the Izbicer certainly understood the rationale behind this method, he ruled it out. He was relatively tolerant of desire, even if he saw it as a reprehensible and lesser quality. Since human nature is the result of God's will, powerful desires are also the outcome of his will, and thus are often beyond one's control. In such cases God “defeats” the person, and therefore does not expect of him to overcome the desires he implanted in him. Leiner provides at least two concrete examples of situations related to sexuality where deviation from Halakhah is permissible in order to focus on “the depth of God's will”: the story of Judah and Tamar (Genesis 38), where the Izbicer defends Judah; and the story of Zimri and Cozbi (Numbers 25), where he defends Zimri son of Salu, who is usually reviled in traditional commentaries. Neither of these stories, it should be noted, are mentioned in passing or as part of some local discussion but rather were brought up in paradigmatic arguments that the Izbicer referred to again and again, both explicitly and implicitly, in other parts of *Mei Hashiloah*.¹⁰¹ As noted, the Izbicer was willing to accept that strong sexual urges, where “man's desires overcome him to the point of immobility,” indicate that the desire is God's will.¹⁰²

The two negative qualities of anger and desire appear in many of the Izbicer's homilies, though not consistently. They are often presented as op-

⁹⁶ *Mei Hashiloah*, II, Tetzze, 38b.

⁹⁷ *Mei Hashiloah*, I, Proverbs, 7a.

⁹⁸ *Mei Hashiloah*, II, Proverbs, 53a.

⁹⁹ *Mei Hashiloah*, I, Proverbs, 6a.

¹⁰⁰ See also Seeman, “Martyrdom, Emotion and the Work of Ritual,” 258.

¹⁰¹ *Mei Hashiloah*, I, Toldot, 10c; Vayishlah, 13a; Balak, 53d (implicitly); Matot, 55b; *Mei Hashiloah*, II, Beha'alotkha, 29d–30b. Yif'at Lev compared two Polish-Hasidic thinkers—the Izbicer and the Sfat Emet (R. Yehudah Arye Leib Alter of Gur)—through a juxtaposition of their interpretations of two typological biblical figures: Judah and Joseph (Lev, “Ki Hineah Hamelakhim No'adu”). Her analysis demonstrated how the arguments of the Sfat Emet were reactions to those of the Izbicer. This method might work in the case of the Kotzker and the Izbicer. However, my own search for the Kotzker's references to Judah, Joseph, Zimri, and Pinehas—the famously typological figures of the Izbicer—rendered no fertile results. Heschel found a nice example of a midrashic idea that the two thinkers interpreted in contrasting ways, which manifests the Izbicer's criticism of the Kotzker's path: Heschel, *Kotzk*, 2:632–35.

¹⁰² *Mei Hashiloah*, I, Tetzze, 62a. See also Heschel, *Kotzk*, 2:640.

posites,¹⁰³ but with his usual inconsistency he also argues at least in one place that the root of desire is anger.¹⁰⁴ The Izbicer argues in other places that anger is a remedy for desire,¹⁰⁵ thereby admitting the efficacy of anger and even perhaps advocating its use. In yet another homily, he states that such use should be made “just a little,”¹⁰⁶ while in other places he asserts that anger is worse than desire,¹⁰⁷ and that it has no place among the people of Israel.¹⁰⁸ Thus he argues that anger should be expunged completely, even at the expense of overcoming desire. A study of the context for these discussions leaves almost no doubt that they are in fact a critique of the doctrines of Rabbi Mendel of Kotzk. As Faiierstein has already noted, the Izbicer’s perception of anger can and should be seen as opposition to the Kotzker’s path.¹⁰⁹ Leiner actually suggests that the Kotzker wished to escape desire, but in the process fell into a more serious sin: anger. Indeed, in one homily the Izbicer stated that “the heart cannot be free of thoughts and wishes for even a single moment, and when one removes thoughts of desire from one’s heart, they are replaced by thoughts of anger and the like.”¹¹⁰ The solution to this conundrum, the Izbicer argues, is to fill one’s heart with love of God.¹¹¹

But here we may ask: If every negative quality is the result of God’s will—which is why the Izbicer is relatively tolerant of sexual desire—why shouldn’t he be equally tolerant of anger? Is this not also God’s will? In a discussion seemingly addressed directly at the rebbe of Kotzk he purposely abandons from his passive stance to emphasize that a leader of Israel must be “good to all of Israel” and should treat them with mercy rather than anger: After all, “the quality of anger has no place in Israel.”¹¹² According to the Izbicer, a man who accumulates anger—even a righteous servant of God—cannot be credited for everything, since he does not share the fundamental character of the people of Israel.¹¹³ The Izbicer is familiar with the various excuses with which hasidim justify the anger of the Tzaddikim: that anger is necessary for a proper rebuke; that it is anger for the sake of heaven; or anger rooted in love and caring; or holy anger at sinners and evil men. He does not find these excuses convincing. In his opinion, a forceful rebuke is only effective when used against exceptional people such as Moses, while ordi-

¹⁰³ See, e.g., *Mei Hashiloah*, II, Tetze, 37d–38a.

¹⁰⁴ *Mei Hashiloah*, II, Tisa, 20b–c.

¹⁰⁵ See, e.g., *Mei Hashiloah*, I, Noah, 5c; *Mei Hashiloah*, I, Beha’alotkha, 48c–d.

¹⁰⁶ *Mei Hashiloah*, I, Vezot Haberakhah, 66a.

¹⁰⁷ *Mei Hashiloah*, I, Vaera, 21a.

¹⁰⁸ *Mei Hashiloah*, II, Naso, 47b.

¹⁰⁹ Heschel, *Kotzk*, 2:640; Faiierstein, *All Is in the Hands of Heaven*, 85. See also Cohen, “Toda’ah ‘Atzmit Besefer Mei Hashiloah,” 108–11.

¹¹⁰ *Mei Hashiloah*, I, Bo, 21d–22c.

¹¹¹ *Mei Hashiloah*, I, Bo, 21d–22c.

¹¹² *Mei Hashiloah*, Shoftim, 61c.

¹¹³ *Mei Hashiloah*, II, Mishpatim, 17a–b.

nary people must be rebuked amenably.¹¹⁴ The anger of the wise scholars can be positive—after all the Izbicer could not reject anger completely where the Talmud is amenable to it—but only when it is well aimed and precisely measured. Even the slightest exercise of excess, can doom one to the abyss.¹¹⁵ Even righteous anger can thus be wrong.¹¹⁶ Leiner rejects all attempts to justify anger with the argument that it is rooted in love (often drawing on the verse “whom the Lord loveth he correcteth”; Prov. 3:12). Love, he states, must be expressed in a pleasant way rather than by “stricture”¹¹⁷ (*hakpadah*—a word often used to describe the more lofty anger of the Sages). There are also some contradictions in the Izbicer’s stance on anger at transgressors: in some places he deems it permissible,¹¹⁸ while in others he determines that even they should not be rebuked too harshly.¹¹⁹ “Every Jew who stumbles [sins], stumbles into the Lord Almighty’s bosom,” he argued.¹²⁰ Even the righteous, Leiner argues, view the world through “garments” and through these lenses they see the Lord’s anger at the sinners and follow it from this perspective. However, when, in the time of redemption, God removes these “garments,” all will see that he was never angry at Israel and, thus, the anger of the righteous will disappear as well.¹²¹

Historical accounts of Rabbi Mordekhai Yosef Leiner leave no doubt that his personality was very different from that of the Kotzker.¹²² Their common teacher, R. Bunem of Pshiskhe, said that R. Mordekhai Yosef was like “the waters of the Shiloah that go softly [Isa. 8:6] but penetrate into far depths.”¹²³ Unfortunately there is a dearth of sources on this issue from his own times, and scholarship must make do with later sources. However, the fact that descriptions in these sources are extremely consistent, even when they are unrelated, supports our confidence in their reliability, at least until more reliable sources that contradict them are found. Thus, for example, Yehiel Yeshaiiah Trunk portrays the Izbicer as sharply contrasted with the Kotzker:

¹¹⁴ *Mei Hashiloah*, I, Haazinu, 65a–c.

¹¹⁵ *Mei Hashiloah*, II, Korah, 31d–32a. Elsewhere he appears to treat this kind of anger sympathetically (I *Mei Hashiloah*, I, Joshua, 1c), but here too, he probably is referring only to measured limited anger.

¹¹⁶ *Mei Hashiloah*, I, Emor, 41c–d.

¹¹⁷ *Mei Hashiloah*, II, Shemini, 23d–24a.

¹¹⁸ *Mei Hashiloah*, I, Toldot, 11c–d.

¹¹⁹ *Mei Hashiloah*, I, Shemot, 19b–c; *Mei Hashiloah*, II, Shoftim, 61b. He also noted that one should not “be angry with one’s neighbor who is not as strict.” *Mei Hashiloah*, I, Shoftim, 60c.

¹²⁰ R. Tzadok Rabinovitch of Lublin, *Peri Tzaddik*, IV (Lublin: Schneidmesser, 1933), Naso, article 15 (p. 37d). See also *Peri Tzaddik* IV, Rosh Hodesh Av, article 1 (p. 117d–118a). He also said that in the time of redemption it will be shown that the Jews have eaten only from the good side of the Tree of Knowledge (*Peri Tzaddik*, V [Lublin: Schneidmesser, 1934], Rosh Hoshanah, article 5, 84b).

¹²¹ *Mei Hashiloah*, I, Tisa, 30a.

¹²² See Elijah, “Temurot bamahshava hadatit bahasidut Polin,” 408 n. 51.

¹²³ *Mei Hashiloah*, II, 4. This saying, quoted by the Izbicer’s grandson, was a source of inspiration for the title of the Izbicer’s book, *Mei Hashiloah* (Waters of the Shiloah), along with the fact that the acronym of his first names in Hebrew are the letters of the word *Mei*.

“Reb Mordekhai Yosef was an excellent conversationalist, loving to talk and preach Hasidism. The hasidim were brothers to him, and he regularly joined them in mystical communion. This alienated him even more from the Kotsker’s standoffishness. If one of the hasidic students tried to explain the Kotsker’s eccentric habits by saying that he had been elevated to the rank of an angel and behaved like one, Mordekhai Yosef answered sarcastically that there were enough angels in heaven and here on earth what was needed was a rabbi to study with his hasidim.”¹²⁴

The portrait of the Kotsker emerging from both theological and historical sources reveals that he sought to uproot human nature in a great storm and bring about “elevation” by radical means. The Izbicer, in contrast, pronounced that man’s nature, including all his “deficiencies,” was God’s will, and, therefore, one must learn to accept them as given, with composure and *Yishuv hada’at* (temperance), and attempt to fathom God’s will from them. The rebbe, the spiritual leader, should not be angry at the hasid who had not achieved perfection but rather help him make peace with himself and make the most out of his situation. According to Faienstein, the dispute between the Kotsker and the Izbicer was more personal than theological,¹²⁵ and there is certainly some validity to this argument, but it was the different temperaments of the two leaders that ultimately shaped their different approaches (or perhaps it was the reverse). The Kotsker’s anger at hasidim who were unable to overcome their desires or inclinations was not merely a matter of personality but also an expression of his views on the struggle against human nature. The moderation and inclusiveness the Izbicer displayed toward such followers were likewise, not just a matter of personality, but also an expression of a fundamental position of acceptance and tolerance toward imperfect human nature.

¹²⁴ Yehiel Yeshaiah Trunk, *Poylen: My Life within Jewish Life in Poland: Sketches and Images* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 80. Bialer’s description is similar: “Rabbi Mordekhai Yosef . . . drew to him the young hasidim and the common masses, attracting them with his simple fatherly attitude. R. Leibele [Eiger], too, . . . became attached to Rabbi Mordekhai Yosef and became one of his closest disciples and admirers. He found comfort with him, viewing him as the standard bearer of the Rebbe of Lublin [“the Seer”]—the ideal righteous leader in Rabbi Leibele’s eyes. He remembered that the Rebbe of Lublin placed ‘love’ and ‘forgiveness’ at the center of hasidic thought, while the method of ‘terrorizing’ was developed at Kotzk. Instead of advocating for the people of Israel there was raging indictment. Rabbi Leibele, in his simplicity, his character, his tendency to mysticism, and qualities of grace and mercy, could not find himself in this electrified atmosphere” (Yehudah Leib Bialer, “Haari Hahai,” in *Entsiklopedyah shel galuyot* [Encyclopaedia of the Jewish Diaspora], vol 5, *Lublin* [Tel-Aviv: Hevrat entsiklopedyah shel galuyot [Society of the Encyclopedia of the Jewish Diaspora], 1956–57], 196–97). As noted at the end of the quote, Bialer views this as the true path of the Seer of Lublin (R. Ya’akov Yitzhak Horowitz), from which R. Mendel of Kotzk deviated and which the Izbicer returned to and revived. He demonstrates that this path, rather than the path of Kotzk, was suitable to the temperament of R. Yehudah Leib Eiger, the protagonist of his description. For similar characterizations of the Izbicer: Shalom Yehezkel Shraga Rubín (Lavi), *Pinnat Yikrat* (Brooklyn, NY: Sgulah, 1968), 102; Shlomo Zalman Shragai, *Beheilkhil Izbica-Lublin* (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1977), 18.

¹²⁵ Faienstein, “Kotzk-Izbica Dispute.”

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All this indicates that the Izbicer's goal was to instill calm. He had no great demands, and he did not encourage restlessness or bitterness, but rather the temperate acceptance of oneself and one's qualities. His attitude toward sexual desire is derived from this as well: it is worth fighting, of course, whenever it leads one to transgression. But when it is not the case, one does not have to take unreasonable measures against it or wallow in guilt but rather understand that this is a force that is part of one's nature, instilled by God. And if it was instilled by God, then it is God's will and suppressing it would be going against God's will.

Assuming this analysis is correct, we may now attempt and answer the question of why the Izbicer rebbe needed to employ his antinomian-seeming arguments. If he was willing to recognize the "deficiencies" in human nature as a product of divine will, the question asks: How far can this be taken? Do you also accept the *results* of these deficiencies, that is, transgressions? The Izbicer's response is that in an ideal world, where man truly fathoms the will of God, the answer would be yes. However, in our real world, where man faces "concealment" (of God and truth) and must be wary of his *negi'ot*—the answer is no. Thus, the Izbicer is able to ride two horses at the same time: On the one hand he maintains the consistency of the central argument that leads him to antinomian radicalism, while on the other hand he neutralizes that radicalism by turning it into a purely theoretical issue and so returns to the fold of Halakhah.

THE UNIVERSAL LEVEL: THEORETICAL ANTINOMIANISM AND UTOPIA

The above explanation appears to provide a compelling response to the question of why the Izbicer needed to employ (neutralized) antinomian arguments in his debate with the Kotzker rebbe. However, it is worth taking this discussion one step further: Is there some greater, perhaps even universal, significance to theoretical antinomianism, beyond the confines of a specific hasidic debate in the nineteenth century?

Before attempting to answer this question, I must note that despite extensive searches, I did not identify *theoretical* antinomianism in other monotheistic religions. Antinomianism does exist in these religions, but in such cases it is carried to its logical conclusion, going all the way in its opposition to religious law or suspending it; nomism certainly exists in them all; but I was unable to find a theologian who presented his readers with an antinomian fantasy and then proceeded to undermine it with unmeetable conditions and other such limitations. Nomian authors do sometimes present antinomian descriptions of a distant past or, more often, of a distant future, but in such cases they clarify that their descriptions apply to those specific periods and do not present them as belonging to the present under theoretical, unachievable conditions. All the same, the problem raised by this phenomenon is universal in my opinion, because it refers to the fundamental issue.

As noted, Joseph Weiss has described Rabbi Mordekhai Yosef Leiner's thought as "religious utopia."¹²⁶ Weiss was referring primarily to the fact that the religious freedom the Izbicer longed for, as well as his view that all of Israel's sins weren't in fact sins, belong to a longed-for future, to the days of redemption. Similarly, my analysis of *Mei Hashiloah* indicates that acting in accordance with the "depth" of God's will, that which is above and beyond laws took place in the glorious past and will take place again only "in the future": that is, in the time of the redemption to come, when all blinds are removed and man will be able to fathom the essence of God's will directly.¹²⁷ The idea that the commandments, or at least some of them, will be abolished at the time of the redemption has been known since the time of the Talmud¹²⁸ and was developed in the kabbalistic tradition for centuries before Leiner.¹²⁹ Thus, his notion that in the time of the redemption the commandments will remain in place, and that one will only occasionally be allowed to diverge from them in order to reach a deeper level of God's will, seems anything but radical or "bold." For the sake of precision, we should note that the Izbicer discusses such action also in the reality prior to redemption, or utopian times, but his description remains utopian in nature, since the characters acting in this way are utopian *figures* representing ideal qualities, total attention to God's will and elevation above all *negi'ot*. Theoretical antinomianism is theoretical because it is utopian. It is not applicable to this world because it depends on a reality that cannot exist in this world. Therefore, a true understanding of theoretical antinomianism is linked, and perhaps even contingent upon, understanding the nature of utopia.

Why, then, do people write utopian books? If they themselves are aware that their visions cannot come true, why are they compelled to imagine them, and all the more so, in such length and detail? The authors of classical utopian novels probably did not contemplate this question, but scholarship and research about them certainly did: most emphasize the change-promoting function of utopia. Lamartine's famous saying, "Les utopies ne sont souvent que des vérités prématurées" (Utopias are often nothing but premature truths),¹³⁰ reflects the idea, shared by many later authors, that utopias are not just unrealistic dreams but are descriptions that open the mind, and sometimes even give the impetus, to advancing change. I would call this the *change-promoting* or, in more extreme cases, even the *revolutionary function of utopia*.

¹²⁶ Weiss, *Studies in Eastern European Jewish Mysticism*, 209–48.

¹²⁷ *Mei Hashiloah*, I, Shabbat, 12a–c; *Mei Hashiloah*, I, Pesahim, 14d.

¹²⁸ BT *Niddah*, 61b

¹²⁹ Gershom Scholem, "Redemption through Sin," in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality*, ed. Arthur Hertzberg (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), 55, 67–77, and under "commandments" and "*Mitzvah, mitzvot*" in the index.

¹³⁰ Alphonse de Lamartine, *Histoire des Girondins* (Paris: Furne et Coquebert, 1847), vol. 3, bk. 23, chap. 15, 264.

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According to Karl Mannheim, “Utopias . . . orient conduct towards elements which the situation, insofar as it is realized at the time, does not contain.”¹³¹ Furthermore,

The relationship between utopia and the existing order turns out to be a “dialectical” one. By this is meant that every age allows to arise (in differently located social groups) those ideas and values in which are contained in condensed form the unrealized and the unfulfilled tendencies which represent the needs of each age. These intellectual elements then become the explosive material for bursting the limits of the existing order. The existing order gives birth to utopias which in turn break the bonds of the existing order, leaving it free to develop in the direction of the next order of existence.¹³²

Ernst Bloch, who dedicated much of his work to the analysis of utopian visions and their presence in various spheres of culture, writes about “the utopian function.” This function comes into existence when “hope itself, this authentic expectant emotion in the forward dream, no longer just appears as a merely self-based mental feeling, . . . but in a conscious-known way.”¹³³ This function is what catalyzes action: its imagery and ideas “extend, in an anticipating way, existing material into the future possibilities of being different and better.”¹³⁴ Working in this way, the imagination of the utopian function “is distinguished from mere fantasizing precisely by the fact that only the former has in its favour a Not-Yet-Being of an expectable kind, i.e. does not play around and get lost in an Empty-Possible, but psychologically anticipates a Real Possible.”¹³⁵

Lyman Tower Sargent, in his popular yet instructive book on utopianism, summarizes six main motivations identified by scholarship on the subject. Sargent refers to sociopolitical utopias and dystopias, but his analysis holds true, with the requisite adjustments, to religious and other utopias as well: “Literary utopias have at least six purposes, though they are not necessarily separable. A utopia can be simply (1) a fantasy, or it can be (2) a description of a desirable or undesirable society, (3) an extrapolation, (4) a warning, (5) an alternative to the present, or (6) a model to be achieved.”¹³⁶

A number of thinkers and scholars, however, have noted that, besides its change-promoting function, utopia might play an opposite role. Bloch himself warned against utopias that do not fulfill the “utopian function.” What he called “abstract utopias” or, more pejoratively, “pure wishful thinking” is a premature form of utopia, “still predominantly without solid subject behind it and without relation to the Real Possible.”¹³⁷ Such a utopia “is easily led

¹³¹ Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia* (London: Routledge 1960), 176.

¹³² Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, 179; see also 183.

¹³³ Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), 1:144.

¹³⁴ Bloch, *Principle of Hope*, 1:144.

¹³⁵ Bloch, *Principle of Hope*, 1:144.

¹³⁶ Lyman Tower Sargent, *Utopianism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 8. Numbering in parentheses is the author’s.

¹³⁷ Sargent, *Utopianism*, 145.

astray, without contact with the real forward tendency into what is better.”¹³⁸ From his Marxist position he adds that this type of utopia is not only infertile but also harmful, as it strengthens the existing order: “The undeveloped utopian function is the widespread and ripe old platitude of the way-of-the-world philistine, of the blinkered empiricist whose world is far from being a stage, in short, the confederacy in which the fat bourgeois and the shallow practicist have always not only rejected outright the anticipatory, but despised it.”¹³⁹ In other words, the utopia can serve a function that is contrary to the change-promoting function, one that we may call *the conservative function of utopia*.

Similarly, Paul Ricoeur, also embracing a Marxist point of view on the subject, discerned conflicting functions of both ideology and utopia. In an overtly judgmental way that only Marxists and critical theorist allow themselves, he simply called them the positive and the negative functions of utopia (and ideology).¹⁴⁰ On the one hand, there is the positive function: “This development of new, alternative perspectives defines Utopia’s most basic function. May we not say then that imagination itself—through its Utopian function—has a constitutive role in helping us rethink the nature of our social life? Is not Utopia—this leap outside—the way in which we radically rethink what is family, what is consumption, what is authority, what is religion, and so on? Does not the fantasy of an alternative society and its exteriorization ‘nowhere’ work as one of the most formidable contestations of what is?”¹⁴¹ But then comes the other, negative, function:

The nowhere of Utopia may become a pretext for escape, a way of fleeing the contradictions and ambiguity both of the use of power and of the assumption of authority in a given situation. This escapism of Utopia belongs to a logic of all or nothing. No connecting point exists between the “here” of social reality and the “elsewhere” of the Utopia. This disjunction allows the Utopia to avoid any obligation to come to grips with the real difficulties of a given society. All the regressive trends denounced so often in Utopian thinkers—such as the nostalgia for the past, for some paradise lost—proceed from this initial deviation of the nowhere in relation to the here and now.¹⁴²

Utopias, according to Rachel Elboim-Dror in her excellent discussion of the topic, “may also encourage passivity, despair and acceptance of the evil.”¹⁴³

¹³⁸ Sargent, *Utopianism*, 145.

¹³⁹ Sargent, *Utopianism*, 145.

¹⁴⁰ Paul Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 2.

¹⁴¹ Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 16. Ricoeur answers these questions in the affirmative, of course, but then adds: “What is ultimately at stake in Utopia is not so much consumption, family, or religion but the use of power in all these institutions.”

¹⁴² Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 16–17.

¹⁴³ Rachel Elboim-Dror, *Hamahar shel Haetmol* [Yesterday’s tomorrow] (Jerusalem: Yad Ben-Zvi, 1993), 1:16. Elboim-Dror’s extensive and illuminating discussion is one of the best I have read on the theoretical aspects of utopia, and it ought to be translated into English. The translations hereafter are mine.

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Like satires and tragedies, they may “put our sense of guilt to sleep,” and so “we lose the sense of responsibility for our deeds and discover the pointlessness of hope and change.”¹⁴⁴ Authors of utopian works often feared that “utopia that is supposed to criticize and evoke action for change, will become pleasant and narcotizing, thus helping its readers to escape the present instead of agitating a struggle for improvement.”¹⁴⁵ However, even if utopia does not soothe the conscience and “narcotize” the readers with its artistic qualities, it presents the ideal world in colors so different from those of the present world that the gap between them seems unbridgeable.

I would suggest, therefore, an additional purpose, beyond the six described by Sargent: (7) reconciling with that which cannot be radically transformed. Literary utopias sometimes do not inspire a desire for radical change but rather emphasize the distant, unnatural, and therefore unattainable, nature of the longed-for goal, and thereby, perhaps paradoxically, lead to acceptance of the impossibility of fundamentally changing nature. That is why I named it “the conservative function of utopia.”

This conclusion is relevant to other statements that are not intended to be implemented in practice, such as positions that turn out to be purely “theoretical.” Such statements may be expressions of “fantasy” (purpose 1), but clearly there is more to such fantasy in religious literature such as *Mei Hashiloah*. It may be a “description of a desirable society” (purpose 2), or more precisely, a desired spiritual state. Certainly, a spiritual state where a person can allow oneself to deviate from Halakhah—a state of perfection, free of *negi’ot* and a full and clear understanding of God’s will—is desirable and it clearly represents the author’s ideal. Moreover, the very description presents a fascinating and compelling goal for the reader, who at the very least aspires to approach this ideal (purpose 6). At the same time, it is also an extrapolation (purpose 3) of contemporary hasidic exemplars, which also reaffirms their “prerogatives” to behave differently from everyone else, even if it does not permit them to deviate from Halakhah in practice. On the other hand, it is also a warning (purpose 4), in this case not against descent into dystopia (which apparently is what Sargent was referring to), but rather against giving up completely on the aspiration to achieve God’s will directly—a perspective notably associated with the opponents of Hasidism, the Misnagdim. It is undoubtedly an alternative to the present (purpose 5). As noted, the Izbicer states in several places that the utopian state of fathoming God’s will without “concealment” will be achieved in the future, with redemption, when people will also be attuned to his will directly, with no need for “rules.” However, the Izbicer’s utopian statements also serve a different cause: They encourage the reader (originally the listener) to comply with the present imperfect condition of the world (purpose 7),

¹⁴⁴ Elboim-Dror, *Hamahar shel Haetmol*, 16.

¹⁴⁵ Elboim-Dror, *Hamahar shel Haetmol*, 16.

in which the reader cannot decipher God's will, and thus is sent directly to the safe haven of the "rules." This way, the Izbicer's utopia practically fosters a conservative religious approach.

Contemporary research literature on utopia and utopianism has emphasized to the extreme the change-promoting aspects of utopias—aspects that undoubtedly exist—while neglecting to sufficiently develop a discussion of the reverse: the acceptance-promoting or change-neutralizing, or at the very least activism-neutralizing, aspects of utopianism. When utopia is presented as a visionary future state, or alternately as totally imaginary, it can lead the reader to passivity, relegating the utopian state to divine intervention in a distant future (and this, in fact, is one of Marx and Engels's arguments against utopian Socialism).¹⁴⁶ We thus may add to Sargent's purposes of utopian literature the "acceptance effect" (or, more extremely, the "anesthetizing effect") (purpose 7): The Izbicer rebbe did not preach radical change but rather indicates that it is possible and even desirable to accept the limitations of human nature under present conditions in an unredeemed world.

Nearly all of Sargent's purposes of utopia, with the exception of number 1, transform the description of a "theoretical" state into a powerful tool which can actively shape and deploy reality, even when the theoretical state itself is unachievable. The same is true of theoretical antinomianism. The Izbicer did not want people to feel that they were realizing God's will; he wanted them to aspire to that state, and for that aspiration to cause them to better themselves on the one hand, and to be aware of the uncertainty of their condition on the other. At the same time, however, he did not want this awareness to lead people to deny their physical bodies or their weaknesses, but instead to accept them. The release from these weaknesses and their effects are left to the utopian state.

This might appear to be a complex message, but if we were to focus on the bottom line, we would find it quite straightforward: The Izbicer rebbe does not support the actual lowering of halakhic standards, that is deviating from Halakhah, nor does he support raising those standards, that is hyper-halakhic norms allegedly aimed at achieving transcendence above frail human nature. If so, what does he support? The plain answer is that he supports the Halakhic standard itself. Indeed, as noted above, the Izbicer noted explicitly in one of his homilies: "nowadays . . . one cannot reach the depth of God's will through any way other than the Torah and commandments."¹⁴⁷ The Izbicer, the *enfant terrible* of late hasidic thought, thus turns out to be a basically conservative thinker, preaching loyalty to tradition and to Halakhah, while at most dreaming of an alternate reality, which he relegates to visions of the distant past and future.

¹⁴⁶ Roger Paden, "Marx's Critique of Utopian Socialism," *Utopian Studies* 13, no. 2 (2002): 71, 74–75, 78, 88.

¹⁴⁷ *Mei Hashiloah*, I, Hukkat, 51d–52a.

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One more consideration must be added to this discussion, one that has nothing to do with utopias but is relevant to the religious worldview of a traditional theologian as he deals with biblical texts: the neutralized antinomianism enables a defense of biblical heroes without transforming them and their problematic actions into role models. This reasoning confirms a view of the Izbicer rebbe as thinker loyal to tradition and its values, since it establishes the saintliness of the biblical forefathers.

CONCLUSION AND PERSPECTIVE

Having explored the writings of Rabbi Mordekhai Yosef Leiner of Izbica, we appear to have arrived at a new interpretation of his teachings, one in which they are much more conventional than is assumed by most scholars and neo-hasidic admirers. As I see it, the Izbicer doctrine developed largely as the antithesis to the Kotzker doctrine; an extreme reaction to the extreme experiences of Rabbi Leiner at the court of Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Kotzk. While the Kotzk hasidim primarily battled desire, and viewed righteous anger as a means of disciplining men, the Izbica hasidic court fought against anger and, while it never approved of desire, it did not view it as harshly as it did anger. While Kotzk created an entire system of norms demanding of individuals “holiness” beyond the Halakhah, Izbica generally disapproved of such demands. While Kotzk thought of God’s will primarily in terms of “ought” (God’s will is that so and so *ought* to be done), Izbica emphasized its “is” aspect (God’s will is what *is*). Kotzk represents the demand that human nature be uprooted, while Izbica represents acceptance of human nature, teaching that even man’s desires and lusts are the will of God.

The hasid’s question to Rabbi Leiner here is obvious: if man’s lust and desires are also God’s will, then is it also God’s will when he transgresses the law because of them? The Izbicer, ostensibly committed to consistency (despite the many contradictions in his teachings) would reply: In principle yes, but only in principle, since in the present reality of the yet-to-be-redeemed world, there is never any way of knowing whether it is indeed God’s will or one’s own will dressed in spiritual excuses. In the present reality, where one is unsure of God’s will, you must always be suspicious of yourself: suspect that your self-judgment is contaminated by your *negi’ot* (biases), and accordingly follow the safe path of the “fear-of-God” and “restriction.” It is now clear why there is no evidence of transgressions by the rabbis of Izbica or their followers. The Izbicer’s antinomianism remained theoretical and utopian, aimed at goals other than practical guidance of hasidic life. In practice, the Izbicer remained a true conservative and never legitimized deviation from the Halakhah; he most certainly did not require it. This was left as an object of yearning for an alternative historical reality; part of the general yearning for a distant future.