

*Thinking God: The Mysticism of Rabbi
Zadok of Lublin*

By Alan Brill

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Thinking God: The Mysticism of Rabbi Zadok of Lublin By Alan Brill (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 2002) 461 pgs

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Rabbi Professor Alan Brill's study of R. Zadok ha-Kohen offers an incisive portrayal of a traditional Jewish thinker who internalized the sensibility of modernity into his probing religious thought.

R. Zadok and his interpreter, R. Brill, present an Orthodox Judaism that requires that God and not communal convention be the center of the religious quest. Orthodox Jews who live in Orthodox subcultures mimic peers, but rarely confront the core issue of the religious mind, namely how can an individual serve God correctly as he lives his life.

Brill is expert in theology, philosophy, history of ideas, and the canon of classical Judaism. As a modern thinker, Brill is unwilling to reduce Torah to culture mimicry. In R. Zadok, he finds a model from the past that is religiously usable in the modern present.

The monograph proceeds in a paced, logical direction with ideas being presented in a fashion that guides as well as informs the reader. For example, Brill traces the history of halakhic/mystical ideas from R. Elijah ben Solomon Kramer (the Ga'on of Vilna), who is the model of the *lamdan hasid* of *Lita*. R. Elijah reflects not only early modern thought, but also *Kabbalah*, which are mystical ideas that appear in apocalyptic scripture, the *Heikhalot* literature, in the 13th Century kabbalistic revolution in Western Europe, and in the Hasidic movement

of early modern Judaism.

The particular Judaism of R. Zadok finds its roots in R. Simcha Bunim of Prysucha, who initiated the move to cognitive mysticism, in order to "uplift the mind." R. Menahem Mendel Morgenstern of Kotsk aimed to merge *emet*, truth, with *emunah*, faith. For Brill, R. Zadok is the *hasid lamdan* who, unlike R. Elijah, uses the mind, the instrument of Torah, and his individual will to come to know God as best a mortal can. R. Zadok's introspection was "self-analytical nature," which is a sensibility not present in pre-modern thought. Brill's reading of R. Zadok seems to bridge the gap between Maimonidean rationalism and Nahmanidean mysticism. R. Zadok carefully adheres to the canons of rational thought, with his pantheism providing the sense of Divine immediacy.

Brill's book must be read slowly, in its entirety-including footnotes-and savored at that! For further study, the massive bibliography will inform those readers who allow Brill to direct them in the orchard of spiritual growth. A rapid reading will miss the nuances that Brill finds in the rational development of metaphysical ideas. For example, R. Zadok believed that the Torah is a mental construction of reality and he believed that one may find God in one's mind. He also believed that will is a critical emotional fundament in the authentic religious consciousness. The notion of space, time and sufficient reason are, for Immanuel Kant, conditions of human knowing.

The post-Kantian thinker, Arthur Schopenhauer, believed that the Kantian "thing-in-itself," or reality unmediated by the human cognition, is will. Brill demonstrates the similarities of R. Kook and R. Zadok, and Rav Kook happily confesses Schopenhauer's impact on his thought. Brill demonstrates that the internalization of the modern sensibility in R. Zadok's thought enriches and syncretizes his thought. This synthesis is the hallmark of the authentic Modern Orthodox thinker. In order to create an authentic theology, R. Zadok examined his own **subjectivity** with **objectivity**, seeing his individuality as an object; this sensibility parallels Schopenhauer's his own individual subjectivity as if it were an object.

R. Zadok Hasidic worldview never compromised his Lithuanian intellect. Known as "*ha-Kohen*" (the priest), R. Zadok's priestly nature echoes the early mystical traditions, which portray angels and priests with similar metaphors. On one hand, R. Zadok was meticulous in his observance. His first marriage failed because his wife was not sufficiently scrupulous in observing proper inter-gender restrictions. Yet as will be demonstrated below, sin may be used as an instrument of improvement through repentance.

R. Zadok found in R. Mordecai Leiner the fusion of talmudic erudition, personal emotion, and the quest for religious authenticity. It is desire that that raises humans over angels. It is channeling of will, itself inherently neutral, that sanctifies the soul.

Brill takes appropriate note of the common concern for the unconscious and dreams in Western and Hasidic thought. The unconscious in R. Zadok finds expression in the mental torment after sin, which is a reflection of hell.

Brill is at his best when describing the problem of religious determinism in the Izbica tradition, the roots of which are found in R. Isaiah Horowitz's *Shenei Luhot ha-Berit*. As noted, sin is necessary because it lays the groundwork for repentance. This antinomian streak may be an anticipation of modernity. Similarly it seems to

anticipate R. Kook's theory of heresy, which is a corrective to false, conventional clichés that are routinely taken to be true.

R. Zadok finds that the greater the Divine control of the human mind, the greater the "Divine determinism" of the person. (This doctrine parallels the Maimonidean notion that the greater an individual's attainment in Torah, the greater the Divine Providence allotted to that person). The indwelling of God in the individual's mind reflects a redemptive determinism. R. Zadok maintained that free will is not a fact; rather, as Kant suggested, it is a disposition of the mind. While R. Zadok was a fully traditional Jew, his view of sin is strikingly modern and individualistic. Brill contends that this individualism appears in Hasidim who migrated to the city from rural areas, thereby integrating new and modern ideas into their thought.

Brill finds four levels of piety in R. Zadok's thought. The first is found within the living culture of "traditional Jewish piety." The second level is expressed in precise Jewish observance. Third, talmudic rationalism provides a social break. While Brill does not explicate this break, I suspect that through talmudic learning one expresses individualism and reasoned uniqueness as an authentic expression of piety. Finally, the Jew examines one's own unconsciousness introspectively.

Brill exploits the mind of R. Zadok as means of discovering a modern or post-modern piety, synthesizing our consciousness of mind, our commitment to tradition, and our very modern quest for existential authenticity.

R. Zadok's mysticism uses the instrument of Torah study to empower the contemplative learner to appreciate the higher unity of God by rising above the multiplicity and accidents of creation. By stressing individuality in this quest, R. Zadok is at once a modern and pre-modern thinker. This individualism finds expression in R. Zadok's linguistic inquiry, anthropological observations, history of culture, and psychology. His pre-modern synthesis of Torah and secular learning provides a fully

usable model for Orthodox Jews who take the spiritual challenges of modernity seriously.

Alan Brill's study of R. Zadok and modernity is descriptive in its presentation, but normative in its application. After tracing R. Zadok's thought in pre-modern Jewish precedents, he explicates R. Zadok's fully modern concepts of individuality and interiority. Following Cooperman's critique of Jacob Katz (that medievalism is as static as originally conceived), Brill finds seeds of an incipient modernity in pre-modern Jewish culture. Unlike liberal forms of Judaism that endorse the Enlightenment project and cast aside thick Jewish culture and faith, R. Zadok remained fully anchored in traditional culture while allowing modern ideas to fructify his individualistic traditional thought.

Brill maintains that Orthodoxy need not fear the infusion of modern insight, and in this regard, he views Modern Orthodoxy not a form of "*haredi* Judaism lite," but authentic Orthodoxy rooted in the realities of the present. R. Zadok was aware of the innovative rational thought and the modern ideas then current in urban Poland. The response to these new ideas, especially the sense of self interpreted as a strengthening of a faith addressed in a natural way. Like Rav Kook, who con-

fessed the influence of Schopenhauer, R. Zadok's "*Torah u-Madda*" is not at all an allowance for secular learning as an instrumentality of earning a living, but part of a seamless spiritual cloth that naturally and authentically synthesizes internally Jewish and non-Jewish doctrines that ring true. Brill insightfully calls attention to R. Zadok's leaving theosophy, or speculation about God, to the study of interiority, the role of God in the shaping of the mind, which is itself a characteristic of modern thought.

The abiding contribution of this scholarly book lies in its implications. The precedent for individualism and self within Judaism is manifest in the person of R. Zadok, a very traditional Jew with a strikingly modern mind. While R. Zadok's synthesis may be too medieval for today's modern Jew, in a historical context, his quest is our quest. Although communal expectations ought not to be taken lightly, this journey is not about conforming to such expectations, but about mustering the intellectual and religious integrity to think about God.

Rabbi Professor Alan Brill has translated the idiom of R. Zadok into a readable and inspiring piece of scholarship. He reminds us all that, like R. Zadok, to be authentic Orthodox Jews we must be "Thinking about God."