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Ecstatic expeditions: Fischl Schneersohn's "science of man" between modern psychology and Jewish mysticism

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Abstract

This article examines Fischl Schneersohn's (1887–1958) "science of man" as a psychotherapeutic approach situated between modern psychology and Chassidic mysticism. While almost forgotten today, Schneersohn was a prolific writer, well-known in Yiddish-speaking circles as a psychologist, educationalist, novelist, and psychotherapist. As a descendant of an important dynasty of Chassidic rebbes, he grew up inside the Chabad movement, but followed a secular career. The first part of this article traces Schneersohn's biography from the outskirts of the Russian empire to Germany, Poland, the United States, and Palestine, and shows how his upbringing and historical experiences shaped his psychological works and his self-understanding as educationalist and psychotherapist. The second part examines Schneersohn's main work, *Studies in Psycho-Expedition*, which blended Chassidic mysticism and contemporary psychology in a way that was both idiosyncratic and unique. The psycho-sociological "science of man" was a modern psychological and psychotherapeutic approach, using specific methods to gain knowledge about the human mind, and to counteract and treat mental disorders, neuroses, and nervousness. At the same time, however, it was deeply influenced by Chassidic mysticism; revolving around the assumption of a universal human need for spiritual ecstasy. Schneersohn universalised, secularised, and reframed elements of the Kabbalah as a modern psychotherapy. By examining an almost forgotten psychotherapeutic approach outside the mainstream in its specific historical context, this article contributes to the history of the connection between religion and the psy-disciplines, as well as to ongoing debates about the role of spirituality and ecstasy in psychology and psychotherapy.

Keywords

Chassidism, history of psychotherapy, Jewish Studies, mysticism, spirituality, 20th century

The history of the uneasy relationship between religion and psy-disciplines is as old as the modern "sciences of the mind" themselves. Often, their encounters are described as a border conflict fiercely fought over the territory of the human soul. Depending on perspective, the psy-disciplines heroically liberate the soul from ancient superstition and obscurantist oppression or illegitimately invade the world of spirituality by pathologising and suppressing universal aspects of human life. Newer research, however, has drawn a richer picture, highlighting connections, intersections, and interferences (Hayward, 2017).

Of particular interest is the relation between mysticism and psychotherapy. Mystical and ecstatic experiences have long challenged both religious and psychiatric authorities. By claiming a direct, emotional connection to the cosmos, mystics offer expressive and

affective ways of religious practice, while bypassing religious institutions and dogmata, vitalising and contesting religious authority. From the perspective of the psy-disciplines, religious mysticism was long considered a symptom of insanity and a dangerous and potentially contagious source of irrationality and superstition (Hayward, 2017, pp. 140–141). Some psychologists, like William James (1842–1910) or Carl G. Jung (1875–1961), viewed mystical experiences more

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positively, as aspects of a fulfilling existence and as keys to the unconscious (Dein, 2010). To Jung, mysticism was one part of a broader effort to heal the soul, and variations of this theme have been proposed by other scholars (Badalamenti, 2014). After all, psychotherapists, even more than other representatives of the psychodisciplines, have often been seen in a quasi-religious role, as a caste of “secular priests” offering spiritual guidance to those lost in the modern, post-religious world (Hayward, 2017, p. 138).

The relation between psychotherapy and religion that has attracted the most attention is that between psychoanalysis and Judaism. As Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) and many of his early followers were of Jewish origin, historians of psychoanalysis have explored the role that their cultural and religious upbringing and the situation of Jews in the Habsburg Empire played in psychoanalysis, as well as the impact of the purported Jewishness of psychoanalysis on its reception in the 20th century (Kauders, 2017). The influence of the mystical strains of Judaism on psychoanalysis has been the issue of some debate, with some additions in the last decade (Bakan, 1958; Berke, 2015; Eigen, 2012; Kradin, 2016). However, the links are often not as clear as some of the authors suggest. Although his father came from a Chassidic family, Freud ignored the mystical traditions of Ashkenazi Judaism and essentially considered religion a superstitious remnant of former times that modern science had rendered obsolete. The alleged connections between Kabbalah and psychoanalysis are often based on apocrypha and conclusions by analogy, rather than on strong historical evidence.

Instead of a “hidden Freud” there was, however, a real person bridging psychotherapy and Jewish mysticism in the early 20th century: Fischl Schneersohn (1887–1958), who was descended from an eminent Chassidic dynasty and became a physician, educationalist, novelist, and psychotherapist. His holistic “science of man” was an idiosyncratic blend of Chassidic mysticism and modern psychotherapy. I trace Schneersohn’s biography to situate his “science of man” in its historical context. This account is based on Schneersohn’s published writings, contemporary reviews of his work, and the small body of historiography. Subsequently, I take a closer look at Schneersohn’s theories, examining how his translation of Jewish mysticism into a treatment for nervousness drew on contemporaneous debates in the psychodisciplines, while at the same time radically redefining the concept of nervousness and the role of ecstatic experiences.

Using an historical approach, this article adds to a growing body of research on spirituality and mental health. In recent decades, many studies have addressed

spirituality, religion, and mental health, often indicating relations that are more positive than assumed in earlier research. Nevertheless, in a 2012 survey of the literature, Dein, Cook, and Koenig (2012) note that the field is still in its infancy and that many empirical studies are limited by their generalising concepts of religion and spirituality (see also Dein, 2005; Clark, 2010). They argue for the inclusion of qualitative and comparative perspectives from anthropology, theology, and religious studies to explore what different notions of mental health and religion mean in specific communities. Historical perspectives on psychotherapy and psychiatry can contribute, too. This article focuses not on mental illness in a community, but on a method of mental healing that, while stemming from a specific spiritual background, made a forceful claim to universality. It explores an historical attempt to translate mysticism into a theory and practice for psychotherapy, in which an entire psychology was mapped on a spiritual system of thought. Concepts such as the soul, spheres, ecstasy, creativity, and redemption were lifted from their religious origins and reframed as parts of a scientific and secular treatment for the mental ailments of modern life. While Schneersohn’s “science of man” did not grow into a school of its own, the dialogue between Jewish mysticism and mental health is ongoing. Recently, adherents of Chabad have begun integrating secular approaches to life coaching and mindfulness into their religious mission (Karlin, 2014; see also Littlewood & Dein, 1995).

Yiddishland

Fischl Schneersohn was born in 1887 in Kamianets-Podilskyi in present-day Ukraine (Krutikov, 2012; Lilienthal & Kreft, 2012; Saß, 2012b). At the time, it was part of the Russian Empire, located in the western rim of the empire where Jews were allowed to settle. In terms of culture, ethnicity, religion, and language, he grew up in a region later called “Yiddishland”. He came from a prominent Chassidic dynasty: Schneersohn was the last name adopted by the descendants of Shneur Zalman of Liadi (1745–1812), an influential Chassidic leader of the 18th century (Etkes, 2015; Stroll, 2007). Shneur Zalman—or the *alter rebbe* (“old rabbi”)—was the founder of Chabad, a school of thought inside Chassidism named for the Hebrew acronym of “wisdom”, “understanding”, and “knowledge” (Rubinstein & Elior, 2007). At the time of Fischl Schneersohn’s birth, Chabad was a local sect, led by a succession of rebbes descending from Shneur Zalman and residing in the village of Lyubavichi. The name “Lubavitch” stuck even as the movement’s leadership relocated to Brooklyn in 1940, from where it grew into the global

religious organisation that it is today. Until the death of Menachem Mendel Schneersohn (1902–1994), who was revered as the Messiah by many of his followers, the name Schneersohn was almost synonymous with the Chabad dynasty (Rubinstein & Elijor, 2007).

However, there is no need here for an in-depth discussion of the tenets of Chabad Chassidism (Elijor, 1993). Fischl Schneersohn grew estranged from Chabad early on and instead pursued a secular education and career. Many of the ideas he adopted in his psychological works stemmed from a broadly conceived Chassidism rather than from Chabad specifically. Hence, a few historical and socio-religious explanations, as far as they are relevant to understand Schneersohn's conception of the mind and its treatment, will suffice. As a branch of Chassidism, Chabad shares many of its characteristics. Emerging in late 18th-century Poland–Lithuania, Chassidism drew on older mystical, messianic and Kabbalistic strains of Judaism and integrated them into a popular religious movement marked by “ecstasy, mass enthusiasm, close-knit group cohesion, and charismatic leadership” (Rubinstein et al., 2007, p. 393; see also Biale et al., 2017; Spallek & Wodziński, 2018). Living in closed communities under the authority of *zaddikim*—charismatic leaders with mystical and magical powers bridging Heaven and Earth—Chassidim engages in distinct forms of prayer, song, and dance to achieve *devekut*, a joyful communion with God (Scholem, Garb, & Idel, 2007, pp. 661–662). Shneur Zalman of Liadi, was a prominent *zaddik* in Belorussia. His 1796 work *Tanya* became the foundational text of Chabad as a distinct system of thought (Stroll, 2007, pp. 504–505). Named for “wisdom”, “understanding”, and “knowledge”, Chabad's approach emphasised contemplation rather than ecstasy, and cognition rather than emotion. Gershom Scholem credited Shneur Zalman and his successors with a major innovation in Jewish mysticism and the shift of the Kabbalah from theosophy to psychology, recognising “in each of the countless stages of the theosophical world also a possible state of the human soul, that is, so to speak, an experimentally identifiable state, ...the Kabbalah was turned into a tool for psychological contemplation and self-analysis” (Scholem, 1980, p. 374). From here a straight path leads to what Fischl Schneersohn named the “psycho-expedition”.

Fischl Schneersohn was steeped in Chassidism early on. Growing up in the home of his grandfather, the rebbe Sholom Dovber Schneersohn of Rechitze, Fischl publicly read and commented on the Talmud by the age of 10 and became a rabbi at the exceptionally young age of 15. Lauded as a “brilliant expert on the Talmud”, he was on track to become a rebbe himself (Saß, 2012b, pp. 7–8).

A first contact between Chabad and modern psychotherapy may already have happened during the same period. The fifth rebbe of Chabad, Sholom Dovber Schneersohn (1860–1920, a namesake of Fischl's grandfather, also known by the same acronym RaSHaB),¹ probably travelled to Vienna in 1902–03 to consult with the “famous professor” Sigmund Freud (Balakirsky Katz, 2010; Berke, 2015, pp. 1–20; Schneider & Berke, 2000). The details are difficult to reconstruct and there is no definite proof that RaSHaB was the rabbi who underwent treatment for a hysterical “occupational neurosis” with Wilhelm Stekel (1868–1940) (Stekel, 1912, pp. 222–231). Whether this affected Fischl Schneersohn remains unclear, but it would help to explain his later interest in nervousness and psychotherapy. More important, however, is his familiarity with the role of the rebbe, who, unlike a rabbi, is not only an expert of Jewish law and practices, but also a spiritual leader with a unique insight into the mysteries of the soul.

Fischl Schneersohn did not remain confined in this religious lifeworld. Inspired by Haskalah ideas as well as by the natural sciences, he pursued a secular education. Against the will of his family, he passed his final examination at a secular high school aged 18 (Saß, 2012b, pp. 8–9). In a biographical sketch submitted as part of this examination in 1906, he wrote about a crisis of faith following the realisation that the Talmud alone could not answer all his questions (Schneersohn, 2012, pp. 269–272). Schneersohn's trajectory was reflective of a more general crisis of Chassidism in the second half of the 19th century, when the movement grew increasingly defensive and conservative, and lost some of its appeal to attract followers (Rubinstein et al., 2007, pp. 396–397). In Schneersohn's later work the disillusionment with institutionalised religion and the contrast between periods of spiritual renewal and institutional ossification became a recurring theme in novels as well as in socio-psychological reflections (Schneersohn, 1927b, 2012; Rubin 2018).

In 1910, Schneersohn enrolled as a medical student at the University of Berlin. That Berlin was a former centre of the Haskalah may have factored into his decision; the strict limitations that the Russian Empire imposed on the number of Jewish students at its universities was another reason that led many Jews to study in Germany (Saß, 2012b, pp. 8–9). Here, Schneersohn encountered assimilated German Jews, as well as a panoply of societies founded by fellow Russian-Jewish students passionately debating politics, social reform, assimilation, Jewish nationalism, and internationalism. Mixing with philosophical and intellectual circles, he met Martin Buber (1878–1965), with whom he remained in contact throughout his life (Saß, 2012b, p. 10). While Schneersohn's religious outlook

had originally been shaped by Chabad, he now adopted an eclectic worldview that combined inside and outside perspectives on Chassidism, focusing on the spiritual power of spontaneous religiosity rather than on the teachings of any specific sect. He credited the early Chassidim for rediscovering a direct, emotional, and egalitarian access to religion at a time when Rabbinic Judaism had become overly intellectual and abstract and dominated by Talmudic authorities (Schneersohn, 1927b, p. 19). Like Buber, Schneersohn came to see Chassidism as a source of Jewish spiritual renewal. This view also shaped his literary works. The 1935 novel *Grenadistraße* (Schneersohn, 1935/2012) tells the story of a German Jew from Berlin for whom a fleeting encounter with the exotic world of Chassidism triggers a search for meaning and fulfillment beyond the lifelessness and ossification of assimilated Judaism (Schneersohn, 2012). The subtle differences between Chassidic sects faded against the promise of ecstatic creativity and spiritual healing.

Catastrophic times

The First World War brought Fischl Schneersohn's studies in Germany to a sudden end. As a Russian national he was interned as an "enemy alien"; after his release he returned to the Russian Empire and passed his medical doctorate at the University of Kyiv. Subsequently, he became an assistant to Vladimir Bekhterev (1857–1927) in Petrograd. Bekhterev's fame rests on his research on conditioned reflexes, but he also shared Schneersohn's interests in child psychology, social psychology, and religious movements (Bekhterev, 1905; Byford, 2016). Nevertheless, they did not share the same views. In the mid-1920s, Schneersohn questioned Bekhterev's concept of "suggestion" as a factor in social life, and his view of collective ecstasy as a curative experience was directly opposed to Bekhterev's description of mystical and religious movements as "mental epidemics" (Schneersohn, 1925–26).

In 1918 Schneersohn returned to the University of Kyiv as a professor and as founder and director of an institute for therapeutic pedagogy (Reisen, 1929, p. 823; Schneersohn, 1922, 1926). He found himself amidst the turmoil of the First World War, the Russian Civil War, and the Polish–Soviet War. Occupied by the German and Polish armies and various factions in the civil war, Kyiv changed hands repeatedly and became the capital of several short-lived attempts at Ukrainian independence. The Jews of Ukraine suffered like no other group. In 1918 and 1919, over 1,200 pogroms were committed by the White armies and Ukrainian nationalists in particular, killing tens of thousands (Gitelman, 2001, pp. 65–70).

Many child victims, injured, traumatised, and often orphaned, were treated in the polyclinic that was part of Schneersohn's institute. This provided him with ample opportunity for psychological observation, later published in a book about the "catastrophic times and the adolescent generation" (Schneersohn, 1924). He was a perceptive and emphatic observer, and his report is a striking account of childhood trauma in post-war Eastern Europe. Pogroms, Schneersohn wrote, were a uniquely devastating experience, as they directly affected children and invaded the home itself: "War and revolution have their sites. The frontline of the pogrom is the house and the family, where the most atrocious scenes of savage violence take place" (Schneersohn, 1924, p. 139).

The outlines of Schneersohn's psychological approach were already discernible in this early work. Interested less in measuring reactions and reflexes than in understanding vulnerable individuals, he envisioned psychology as a political and social science. Blurring the lines between individual and social psychology, Schneersohn saw the mental life of individuals linked to history and group identity. The wounds suffered by the victims of pogroms, were also wounds of the Jewish people and experiences central to their collective identity: "Each one feels the connection between the present moment and the past and future of the people. The sufferings of the individual are the unforgettable moments in the history of the people" (Schneersohn, 1924, p. 138). In the ecstatic religiosity of Eastern European Jews, he saw heroic defiance in the face of anti-Jewish violence: "And in the deepest depth of the soul is revealed the religious ecstasy of a people that more than once went to a fiery death with hands raised in ecstasy" (p. 138). Psychology's contribution to the struggles of the Jewish people would be a new science and practice strengthening individual and collective in times of turmoil; a "socio-psychological hygiene of the mass and the people" (p. 139). Psychiatric visions of a "mental reconstruction" on a national scale were common after the First World War, but Schneersohn's approach differed from the eugenic programmes that were proposed by others (Freis, 2015).

Science of man

Until 1937, Schneersohn frequently moved from one country to another. As the situation in Ukraine deteriorated, he relocated to Warsaw in 1921. In 1923, he returned to Berlin, now a major hub in the westbound migration of Russian Jews and a centre of the Yiddish-speaking diaspora (Brinkmann, 2010; Saß, 2012a). This was the most productive phase in his life. Schneersohn, now in his late 30s, became a prominent figure in the

diaspora. He headed the Jewish community's outpatient clinic for therapeutic pedagogy, where he continued to work with child refugees from Eastern Europe, and developed the pedagogical programming for the children's club of the Association of Russian Jews (Saß, 2012b, p. 12). At the same time Schneersohn became involved in local academic networks, working with Otto Lipmann (1880–1933), head of the Institute for Applied Psychology, and his assistant Paul Plaut (1894–1960), both assimilated German Jews, as well as with the progressive educationalist Franz Hilker (1881–1969). Together with the philosopher David Koigen (1879–1933)—a friend from Kyiv who had also come to Berlin as a Russian-Jewish refugee—he and Hilker published the *Ethos*, a periodical for sociology, social psychology, and philosophy. Now, Schneersohn integrated his psychotherapeutic experiences, broader socio-psychological ideas, and elements of Chassidic mysticism into a comprehensive “science of man”.

Schneersohn's *mentsh-visnshaft* was supposed to examine human life in its complex totality, explore methods to treat and prevent mental illness, and pave the way to a truly humane society in which everyone could live up to their fullest potential. Ten lectures about “the basics of the science of man and a theory of nervousness” were first published in Yiddish in 1927 (Schneersohn, 1927a). A German edition, introduced by Lipmann, followed in 1928 (Schneersohn, 1928). From the beginning, the “science of man” was a practical effort. In the 1927 booklet *Mentsh-gezelshaft*, Schneersohn explained how local communities—the “man-societies” mentioned in the title—would overcome the discontents of secular civilisation by fostering a spirit of *mentsh-kultur* and ushering in the *mentsh-iorhundert*, a “century of man” (Schneersohn, 1927b).

When Schneersohn moved to New York in 1927, he took the *mentsh-visnshaft* with him. *Studies in Psycho-Expedition* appeared as early as 1929 (Schneersohn, 1929), published by the “Science of Man Press”. In April 1930, the press also published the first and only issue of the Yiddish journal *Mentsh-visnshaft*. The book and the journal demonstrate his strategy for the dissemination of his ideas and his ability to find supporters. As in Germany, he published in Yiddish and in the local language, and thus for two audiences: fellow Eastern European Jews, as well as gentiles and assimilated Jews. In Berlin and New York, he enlisted the support of renowned local scholars. The cover of *Studies in Psycho-Expedition* flaunted two of the most prestigious names in American academia, John Dewey (1859–1952) and Adolf Meyer (1866–1950), both of whom had provided brief forewords (Schneersohn, 1929, pp. vii–x). Dewey, the most influential American philosopher and educationalist of his

time, commended Schneersohn's attempt to restore a unifying centre to the fragmented sciences of the mind. Meyer, who was the dominating figure of American psychiatry in the first half of the 20th century, seemed sceptical about Schneersohn's overly enthusiastic promises, but saw his approach as a valuable addition to psychopathology.

In 1933 Schneersohn returned to Warsaw, where he continued his work as a lecturer, educator, and educational theorist. With the shadow of Nazism rising over Europe, questions about the political responsibilities of intellectuals gained in urgency and Schneersohn helped set up an international relief organisation for academics removed from their posts by the Nazis (Lilienthal & Kreft, 2012, pp. 254–255). He found himself drawn back to questions of Jewish identity. Like Freud, who on the eve of the Second World War published his speculative history of the Jewish people as a history of intergenerational trauma, Schneersohn revisited the debate about Jewish collective psychology in a book-length study (Freud, 1939; Schneersohn, 1936; Zaretsky, 2015, pp. 80–118).

After moving to Palestine in 1937, Schneersohn again worked with “mentally defective” children as head of the department for therapeutic pedagogy in Tel Aviv. The situation in Europe worsened as Nazi Germany invaded the neighbouring countries, taking its racial policies beyond its borders. When news of the extermination of the European Jews began to circulate in 1942, Schneersohn founded *Al-Domi* (“do not keep silent”) to rouse the Yishuv leadership and the world to act against the Nazis (Porat, 1989). After the Allied victory had stopped the Nazi apparatus of mass extermination, millions of refugees and survivors of the concentration camps were stranded in Europe. The expertise that Schneersohn had acquired after the Kyiv pogroms became relevant again. In 1948, the new State of Israel sent him to Germany to examine children in the displaced persons camps. The psychological consequences of the Shoah and the possibilities of recovery became the major topic of Schneersohn's work until his death in 1958 (Hofer, 1976, p. 482; Lilienthal & Kreft, 2012, p. 257).

Scientific contraband

Fischl Schneersohn was a liminal figure; moving across the boundaries of countries, disciplines, genres, and cultures. As the writer Jechiel Hofer wrote in an obituary, Schneersohn was well known across the Jewish world, but differently to different groups. Physicians and writers, Bundists, Zionists, and various Chassidic groups considered him one of their own (Hofer, 1976, p. 474). His works, published in Russian, German, French, English, Hebrew, but mostly in Yiddish,

range from child psychology and psychotherapy to social psychology, cultural theory, social reform, and mass psychology. At the same time, he was the author of Yiddish novels and stories, some of them set in the world of Chabad. A common thread connected his works, and the boundaries between different kinds of writing were permeable: Schneersohn's *mentsh-visnshaft* was a project of translation—not only between languages, but also between religious and secular audiences, Jews and gentiles, literature and science, mysticism and psychology.

The “science of man” that was the centre of his psychological and literary writings rested on some core assumptions about the human soul: Schneersohn believed that the mind could not be separated into functions and areas but had to be understood in its “infinite multiformity” (Schneersohn, 1929, p. xii). In this holistic perspective, mind and soul were identical; Schneersohn used the Greek and medical *psyche* and the Hebrew and religious *neshome* (נשמה) interchangeably. For the *mentsh-visnshaft*, every mental illness was also a spiritual illness. Individual differences notwithstanding, Schneersohn saw a common need for fulfilling, even ecstatic experiences transcending “normal”, everyday life, and extolled the healing and uplifting powers of human creativity. His case descriptions as well as his novels are stories of the fall and rise of individuals, descending into nervousness, mental illness, and depravity, before recognising their spiritual needs and revealing their potential—a theme that may be traced back to the dialectic of ascent and descent in the religious ecstasy of the founder of Chassidism, Baal Shem Tov (ca. 1698–1760) (Biale et al., 2017, p. 53; Dresner, 1960, p. 148–190). “He transforms Chassidism into psychological science, he Chassid-ises [*far'hsidus't*] psychology”, wrote one contemporary reviewer, who reproached Schneersohn for selling Chabad mysticism by another name: “he smuggles, he peddles in scientific contraband” (Rivkin, 1928, p. 485). Yet, Schneersohn did more than reframe religious ideas as secular psychology. His *mentsh-visnshaft* was not about subliminally introducing the teachings of Chabad into society, but about reviving the creative impulse that had sparked the emergence of Chassidism as well as other religious and cultural renewals. He introduced mystical elements to 20th-century psychology, upending the conventional wisdom of the discipline in several ways.

Der veg tsum mentsh (Schneersohn, 1927a) is a peculiar text. This is especially true for the idiosyncratic English edition, which was the result of a translation from Yiddish via German. In all three languages, the text is a hybrid in style and substance, equally academic book, political manifesto, and mystical treatise. With its assertions of scientificity, its sweeping claims about

the essence of life, everyday examples, and uplifting stories of recovery and self-realisation, it anticipated the style of today's self-help manuals. Schneersohn saw it as a contribution to psychology, psychotherapy, and mental hygiene. Its hybrid character was encapsulated in the ubiquitous notion *mentsh*. While proposing a new *mentsh-visnshaft* (“science of man”, a term apparently borrowed from David Hume's empirical psychology (Hume, 1739–40)), he also promised the “way to man”. Schneersohn's *mentsh* was both an object of scientific study and a spiritual ideal that had yet to be realised.

Psychology, to Schneersohn, was the only science able to access the secrets of the soul. He was, however, disillusioned by the sort of psychology he had encountered in Bekhterev's “reflexology” and German experimental psychology. Both approaches were mostly concerned with the measurement of reactions to stimuli, and therefore fell short of the potential that Schneersohn recognised in the discipline. Examining “molecules of the soul”, they had forgotten about the realities of everyday life, limiting themselves to fruitless abstractions and considering only parts and aspects of what were in fact complex personalities (Schneersohn, 1929, p. 8).

When Schneersohn began to explore the “unplumbed abysses of the human soul” in the 1920s, psychoanalysis was already well established. Sigmund Freud and his followers had tried to understand the complex dynamics of the human mind not in the laboratory, but in everyday life. Schneersohn recognised its pioneering role, but was nevertheless unconvinced by psychoanalysis, whose “honeymoon of free investigation did not last long” before dogmatism and abstraction set in (Schneersohn, 1929, pp. 8–9). Like many contemporaries, he criticised Freud's concept of “libido”, which he saw as reductionist overemphasis of sexuality and eroticism. Human personalities, Schneersohn insisted, were infinitely more complex than “the erotic man of Freud and the will-to-power man of [Alfred] Adler” (Schneersohn, 1929, p. 17).

“The Science of Man, then, begins at the point where psychoanalysis left off, and avails itself of the positive results of all previous scientific research”, Schneersohn (1929, p. 17) boldly declared. However, Schneersohn rejected some of the central tenets of Freud's psychology, and the similarities were superficial. Like Freud, Schneersohn was a physician before turning his mind towards psychology and wanted to heal the mind as much as scientifically understand the mind. Psychoanalysis and “science of man” blurred the lines between pathological and healthy individuals, whereas contemporary psychiatry saw a clear-cut distinction between sanity and insanity. Both assumed that by examining the apparent symptoms of the

neurotic mind, insights could be won about the hidden workings of the normal mind as well. For Freud, the key had been hysteria; for Schneersohn, it was a related, equally charged and elusive malady: *nervezishkayt*, or nervousness.

Nerves, spheres, and vitamins

Concerns about nervousness, nervous exhaustion, and neurasthenia had been *en vogue* since the last third of the 19th century, and when Schneersohn published his theories in the 1920s, the debate was already abating. Elusive and shifting as the diagnosis was, psychologists and psychiatrists generally agreed that neurasthenia as a characteristic disease of modern civilisation was caused by the overburdening and exhaustion of the nervous system through a constant influx of new impressions and information in an age of rapidly accelerating technological developments and new media (Gijswijt-Hofstra & Porter, 2001). Schneersohn, by contrast, conceived nervousness not as a disease of excessive stimulation, but as a deficiency disease caused by a lack of proper stimuli: *psikhisher skorbut*, or “psychic scurvy” (Schneersohn, 1929, p. 40).

Congruously, Schneersohn claimed that “psychic scurvy” could be healed—or prevented—through the right dosage of vitamins. This metaphor was based on recent medical insights, as most vitamins had been discovered in the first two decades of the 20th century. Schneersohn’s vitamins were less material; they were “vital influences which are of a psychically stimulative, soul-awakening character – combustion sparks” (Schneersohn, 1929, p. 41). Even if other bodily and mental needs were satisfied, the lack of these sparks would lead to a pathological imbalance, causing neuroses, alcoholism and moral depravity, depression, anxiety, and world-weariness. This nutritional metaphor may have been inspired by Shneur Zalman of Liadi, who described the Torah as “food for the soul” (Kaploun, 2017, p. 96).

By postulating a need for ego-transcending experiences, Schneersohn admitted mystical elements to his psychopathological theory. In the Yiddish text, he wrote of *tsind-shtof*, “fuel” instead of “sparks”, kindling the soul rather than igniting it (Schneersohn, 1927a, p. 42). This image was even closer to the idea of human souls as ascending divine sparks that is central to the notion of *tikkun* in the Lurianic Kabbalah, and *devekut*, the climactic ecstatic communion with God that is the goal of Chassidic prayer (Rubinstein et al., 2007, pp. 412–413; Scholem et al., 2007, pp. 655–657). Again, Schneersohn went against the conventional wisdom of his discipline. Contemporary psychologists and psychiatrists were wary of all kinds of religious “enthusiasm”, which they considered a

cause or symptom of mental illness (Hayward, 2017). Schneersohn, on the contrary, touted ecstasy as a healthy, necessary, and curative part of life. In a rare direct reference to Chassidism in his psychological writings, he praised the “immense healing soul-force” of *devekut* as a remedy for “psychic scurvy” (Schneersohn, 1929, p. 170). Throughout the 19th and early 20th century, many physicians believed that mental illness and nervousness were particularly prevalent among Jews; a view often based on anti-Semitic stereotypes associating Jews with the discontents of modern civilisation. Jewish physicians and writers found different answers, from direct repudiation to the appropriation of “Jewish nervousness” to support calls for emancipation (Gilman, 1984). By presenting Jewish mysticism as an antidote to nervousness, Schneersohn offered another reply. Inside Chassidism, Rabbi Kalonymos Shapira (1889–1943) proposed the strikingly similar argument that Jews were in fact prone to nervousness, but that this was a sign of their receptivity for prophetic agitation. Religious ritual and spiritual training thus became ways to prevent and heal nervousness (Seeman, 2008, pp. 478–479).

Nevertheless, Schneersohn avoided any speculation about the metaphysical truth of mystical experiences. His interest in mystical experiences was, on the surface at least, psychological rather than theological, and by psychologising ecstasy, he partially secularised it. Religion in Schneersohn’s work was one, but not the only, domain in which ecstasy could be found. Self-transcendence could also be experienced in love, art—and politics.

Religion, love, and art still are ways in which people search and find ecstasy (Evans, 2017). The notion of politics as a source of positive ecstasy seems less seasonable today. A century of mass movements and charismatic leaders, of massacres and disillusionment lies between us and the early 20th century. However, for Schneersohn who had seen the psychological power of revolution with his own eyes in Petrograd and Kyiv, the excitement was still fresh: “the storm and stress of the masses of humanity in revolutionary commotion, the overwhelming tempo of events, the great surprises, the psychical shocks resulting from these violent happenings, the mental preparedness for any and all kinds of experiences, the more or less keen feeling of dread of the insecurity of life, the menacing peril of riots” could stimulate the neurotic mind (Schneersohn, 1929, p. 55). This description of the 1917 revolution as an exhilarating event stood in stark contrast to the contemporary mainstream view of mass politics and psychology. Gustave Le Bon (1841–1931) had influentially argued that individuals in a crowd would revert to an atavistic, primitive, and emotional state of mind

bordering on madness—a view still echoed by numerous psychiatrists in the aftermath of the First World War (Freis, 2015; van Ginneken, 1992). Although he mocked those waiting for the “messiah of the revolution”, Schneersohn’s view of the revolution was about more than just mental stimulation (Schneersohn, 1927b, p. 30). He sympathised with Marxism, which, in his view, offered a precise analysis of the economic factors governing social life but lacked a proper psychological theory. A psychological “neo-Marxism” would have to integrate “the dialectic dynamics of individual and social mental life” (Schneersohn, 1930, p. 24). Thus far, Schneersohn’s *mentsh-visnshaft* is part of a broader story of left-wing psycho-utopianism and Yiddish radicalism in the first half of the 20th century (Brossat & Klingberg, 2016).

However, the origin and the goal of Schneersohn’s utopianism were anything but materialist. His entire psychology revolved around the idea that in everyone, an unlimited potential of spiritual and ecstatic creativity was waiting to be fulfilled. He used that image of a source: “From the rock of man’s culture, from this apparently barren stone, eternal-fresh waters will, through the creative human word, begin abundantly to spring”, he wrote, alluding to Exodus 17 (Schneersohn, 1929, p. 169). The notion of the “cosmic-intimate primal sources of the soul life” was as close to mentioning God as the scientist Schneersohn came (Masor, 2011, pp. 207–208; Schneersohn, 1929, p. 207). Yet, it was not the Torah, but the New Testament that supplied the slogan for Schneersohn’s promise of universal redemption: “The last can become first.” (Schneersohn, 1929, p. 180)

The flipside of this individual ability to rise was the risk of falling. The dichotomy of “high” and “low” is pervasive in Schneersohn’s works, used in a quasi-religious sense where these directions indicate the proximity or distance from the “cosmic-intimate sources”. The result was a three-part model of mental life, in which the everyday “normal consciousness” was framed by two kinds of exceptional states, which he called “spherical” (Schneersohn, 1929, pp. 91–113). This was an ambiguous term, and while Schneersohn claimed that he had adopted it from psychiatrists Paul Schilder (1886–1940) and Ernst Kretschmer (1888–1964), it was not a common concept in psychology (Schneersohn, 1929, p. 86). There was, however, a long tradition of religious and mystical uses, and in the Kabbalah, it can refer to the emanations of god, the *sefirot* (Drob, 1999, p. 159). Transcendence was possible in two directions—upwards, towards the “spherico-intimate”, where artistic outbursts, prophetic inspiration, ecstasy and true emotions take place, or downwards to the “spherico-primitive”, where the separation from the sources of cosmic creativity leads to

“nervousness, suicide, forced mental degradation”—“psychical scurvy”. Schneersohn had effectively turned “saints” and “sinners” into psychological categories (Masor, 2011, pp. 209–210; Schneersohn, 1929, pp. 109, 144–153).

To illustrate his model of the mental states, Schneersohn used a diagram composed of three concentric circles; the “spherico-primitive” forming the core, the “normal consciousness” the middle, and the “spherico-intimate” the outer layer. Dotted lines connect the three circles, showing the ability to shift between these states (Schneersohn, 1929, p. 113). This model is reminiscent of Freud’s structural model of the psyche consisting of id, ego, and super-ego, and evokes older visualisations of the cosmos as celestial spheres. But Schneersohn’s spherical model can also be linked to Jewish mysticism. In the Kabbalah, speculations about the cosmos and the *sefirot*, took not only the better-known shape of a “tree of life”, but were also depicted as concentric circles, in which the inner layers were subsequently further removed from the Divine (Drob, 1999, pp. 167–171; Scholem et al., 2007, pp. 644–645). A more direct connection to Chabad can possibly be found in *Tanya*, where Shneur Zalman distinguished between two souls contained in the human body, animal soul and divine soul, and added to this model a third, rational, soul as an intermediary (Foxbrunner, 1992, pp. 94–101; Kaploun, 2017, p. 44–45). The tripartite division of the soul of the *mentsh-visnshaft* into two “spherical” and a rational mode maps precisely on Shneur Zalman’s system, in particular as “spherico-intimate” and the “spherico-primitive” states of mind reflect properties of the divine and animal soul, respectively. Like his ancestor, Schneersohn had developed a “spherical” psychology that was also a cosmology.

Conclusion: Psycho-expeditions

The role of the psychotherapist as laid out by Schneersohn was to guide the lost and fallen back to the “cosmic-intimate primal sources”, not unlike a priest or rebbe. There was, however, no single path to redemption. Although the need for “spherico-intimate” experiences was universal, “depending upon character, upbringing, and environment, the spherical striving differs both in degree and direction from individual to individual” (Schneersohn, 1929, pp. 17). The first step of a Schneersohnian therapy was to identify individual needs and appropriate stimuli—the patient’s “spherical quotient”. Schneersohn proposed to venture directly into the soul:

The word “expedition” . . . does not by any means carry a metaphorical meaning. It is a concrete verbal expression indicative of the method and means by which we

are able to penetrate to the core of the integral psychological reality. (Schneersohn, 1929, 87–88)

There were two kinds of “psycho-expeditions”, one for exploring the psyche, one for healing mental disorders. The “research expedition” was similar to a seminar: Schneersohn wrote about a group of 15 to 20 people “under the leadership of one experienced investigator”, who recorded and compared their experiences with exceptional mental states. Beyond the mental life of the participants, the investigation could include works of literature, art, and religion (Schneersohn, 1929, pp. 141–143). If the “research expedition” bore some resemblance to Freud’s “Wednesday Society”, the “cure expedition” more clearly resembled psychotherapy. Schneersohn was vague about the technique. His own role can only be discerned indirectly from the many patient histories in *Studies in Psycho-Expedition*, where he appears as an active guide, diagnosing and explaining their condition to his patients, and advising them on how to change their lives. The “cure expedition” itself, however, was no talking cure, but a solitary experience. Schneersohn described how his patients, at a set time each week, arranged their furniture and their clothing in an “intimate” way, and reflected upon the idea that “I am a man [*sic*], unlimited in his possibilities for rise and in his opportunities of sinking” (Schneersohn, 1929, p. 168). Beginning as self-exploration, the “cure expedition” became an ecstatic spiritual meditation:

Ideas, images, emotions, and longings gradually divest themselves from their supposed fragmentariness and become inwardly intertwined into a concentrically radiating consciousness.... One feels the shuddering-ecstatic inherent pain of the universe and of life, both of which incessantly are being destroyed and shaped anew in the cosmic-eternal cyclone of creation. (Schneersohn, 1929, pp. 167–169)

Schneersohn’s *mentsh-visnshaft* had come a full circle, back to the ecstatic Chassidim of his youth. In the process, however, the mysticism of the Kabbalah was transformed. It had been universalised, secularised, and reframed in the language of modern psychotherapy. What initially had been a religious practice exclusive to a specific group and gender, now appeared as a psychological practice for every *mentsh*, regardless of gender and religion. Stripped of metaphysical dogma, the ecstatic experience of the cosmos became a matter of psychology and mental health. *Devekut* had become psychotherapeutic.

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Note

1. That both rebbes shared the same name is the source of persisting confusion about Schneersohn’s genealogy. The RaSHaB of Lubavitch, however, was born in 1860, which would have made him a grandfather well before the age of 27 (cf. Lilienthal & Kreft, 2012, p. 249).

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