

From the Pages of *TRADITION*

Hillel Zeitlin's "On Select Redeemers"

The interwar period was a time of great political and social ferment for the Jews of Eastern Europe. As empires crumbled and independent nation-states emerged in their place, new political orders took root that offered minority groups greater opportunity for political organization, if not the actual realization of their promised rights. Spurred by these newfound political opportunities, Jews in Eastern Europe formed a rash of parties, movements, and social organizations, each with their own platform and aims.¹ This was the so-called "Golden Age of Jewish Politics" in which numerous ideologies, each with their own party apparatus and vision for the Jewish future, vied for the hearts and minds of the younger generation. These new organizational forms were seized upon by religious leaders as well. Figures such as R. Yosef Yitzhak Schneersohn of Habad-Lubavitch, Nathan Birnbaum, and R. Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, the Piaseczno Rebbe, conceived various religious organizations, societies, and other frameworks that would effect change outside of the dominant political discourse. One such figure was Hillel Zeitlin (1871–1942), a leading Polish-Jewish journalist and religious intellectual who for close to two decades sought in vain to establish fraternal societies for the spiritual and ethical revival of the Jewish people.² Driven by

1 For studies of these movements, see Ezra Mendelsohn, *Zionism in Poland: The Formative Years, 1915–1926* (Yale University Press, 1981); Gershon Bacon, *The Politics of Tradition: Agudat Yisrael in Poland, 1916–1939* (Magnes, 1996); Kalman Weiser, *Jewish People, Yiddish Nation: Noah Prylucki and the Folkists in Poland* (University of Toronto Press, 2011); Daniel Kupfert-Heller, *Jabotinsky's Children: Polish Jews and the Rise of Right-Wing Zionism* (Princeton University Press, 2017); Frank Wolff, *Yiddish Revolutionaries in Migration: The Transnational History of the Jewish Labour Bund* (Brill, 2021); Kenneth B. Moss, *An Unchosen People: Jewish Political Reckoning in Interwar Poland* (Harvard University Press, 2021).

2 Biographical information on Zeitlin can be found in Moshe Waldoks, "Hillel Zeitlin: The Early Years (1894–1919)," Ph.D. dissertation (Brandeis University, 1984); Shraga Bar-Sella, *Bein Sa'ar le-Demama: Hayyav u-Mishnato shel Hillel Zeitlin* (HaKibbutz

a messianic zeal, Zeitlin identified his period as leading up to the end of days, a determination that demanded immediate action.³ His final manifesto, “On Select Redeemers,” appears here for the first time in English translation.

Born in 1871 into a hasidic family in Korma, in contemporary Belarus, Zeitlin came of age amid the first wave of pogroms that sowed the seeds of Jewish political activity in the Russian empire. Settling in Warsaw in 1907, he achieved public prominence as a journalist and polemicist, publishing thousands of articles in the Hebrew and Yiddish press before his death in Treblinka in 1942. Best-known today as an impassioned writer who bridged the traditional worlds of Hasidism and Kabbalah with that of secular Jewish modernity, Zeitlin’s religious vision had considerable socio-political dimensions. Over the duration of the interwar period, Zeitlin issued repeated calls in the Yiddish press and independently published booklets for the formation of fraternal societies of “select individuals” [*yehidim*] tasked with bringing about a religious revival in tune with the socio-political concerns of the day. Zeitlin presented his envisioned spiritual fraternities as a necessary alternative to political parties, yet he utilized the very modes of social and political organization that the latter had introduced. In total, he outlined close to ten distinct societies, each of which had its own name, mission, and envisioned membership.⁴ “Yavneh,” the most fully articulated of these groups, for instance, sought to create a “Hasidism of the Future” that would

HaMeuhad, 1999); Arthur Green, “Hillel Zeitlin: A Biographical Introduction” in Hillel Zeitlin, *Hasidic Spirituality for a New Era: The Religious Writings of Hillel Zeitlin*, ed. Arthur Green (Paulist Press, 2012), 1–32. For an early retrospective on Zeitlin from the pages of *TRADITION*, see Norman Frimer, “A Vignette of Rabbi Hillel Zeitlin and the Holocaust (30 Years After the Storm),” *TRADITION* 15:1–2 (1975), 80–88.

- 3 Further context for Zeitlin’s activities in the interwar period can be found in Oz Bluman, “The Moment of Worldwide Renewal: Hillel Zeitlin and the Theosophical Activity in Warsaw 1917–1924,” *Modern Judaism* 41:2 (2021), 137–161. Bluman posits that Zeitlin’s fraternal societies and related publications were inspired, in part, by the contemporaneous activities of Polish members of the Theosophical Society, an esoteric society founded in 1875 by Madame Helena Blavatsky whose members engaged in the syncretic study of mystical texts as interpreted by Blavatsky and her successors.
- 4 These were “HaBonim” (proposed in 1921); “Yavneh” (1923, 1928); “Ahdut Yisrael” (1928); “Bnei Heikhala” (1928); “Halutzei Yisrael” (1932); “Kedushat Levi” (1933, 1936); “Omek Raz” (1935); “HaMoshi’im” (1936); and “HaMekhavnim” (1939). On “Yavneh,” see Arthur Green and Ariel Evan Mayse, “‘The Great Call of the Hour’: Hillel Zeitlin’s Yiddish Writings on Yavneh,” *In geveb* (March 2016) at <https://ingeveb.org/articles/the-great-call-of-the-hour-hillel-zeitlins-yiddish-writings-on-yavneh>. The Hebrew writings on “Yavneh” appear in Hillel Zeitlin, *Sifran shel Yehidim: Omek Raz, Zakh Mahshava ve-Kisharon Hanhaga u-Ma’aseh le-Nishamot Bodedot ha-Metzapot le-Yishu’at Olamim be-Shanim Eile shel “Ikvata de-Meshiha”* (Warsaw, 1928);

“incorporate all that is healthy, pure, and honest in socialism” with the principles of Beshtian Hasidism.⁵ The charter of an earlier group, the “Bonim” (“The Builders”), by contrast, makes no mention of Hasidism, instead calling for the establishment of a “league for building up the destroyed Jewish life” alongside settlement in Palestine.⁶ “Omek Raz” (“Deep Secret), from the mid-1930s, consisted of a circle of initiates who gathered together to study kabbalistic and hasidic texts “with the explicit aim of grasping the material studied in connection with global events of recent decades.”⁷ Many of the groups offered a practical socio-political vision—a sort of Jewish socialism—integrated with calls for a spiritual renaissance. The common thread tying together Zeitlin’s various efforts was their failure to generate widespread interest; none of the groups appear to have survived for more than a few months, if they ever functioned at all.⁸

“On Select Redeemers” (“*Al Go'alim-Yehidim*”), the text presented here, is Zeitlin’s final manifesto. Here an aging Zeitlin reflects on his past failures to establish spiritual fraternities without renegeing on the dogged hope that he might yet succeed. Published in Warsaw in June 1939 in the Hebrew supplement to *Der nayer ruf* (“*The New Call*”), a short-lived Yiddish monthly edited by Zeitlin’s protégé and future biographer Simcha Bunim Urbach, “On Select Redeemers” signals a retreat from his earlier plans in favor of an elite group of spiritual adepts tasked with ensuring Jewish survival through targeted prayer.⁹ This group, styled “HaMekhavanim”

reprinted in idem, *Sifran shel Yehidim: Ketavim Mekubatzim* (Mossad HaRav Kook, 1979), 5–48.

- 5 Hillel Zeitlin, *Di teyve* (Warsaw, 1924), 8–9; cited in Green and Mayse, “The Great Call of the Hour.” A small Yavneh group was established in Mandate Palestine by Mizrahi activists. See Tzvi Harkavi, “*Perurim*,” in *Sefer Zeitlin*, eds. Isaiah Wolfsberg and Tzvi Harkavi (*Hotza’at HaSefarim HaEretz Yisre’elit*, 1945), 128–129. In the post-war period, several neo-hasidic groups inspired by Yavneh (although without the socialist elements) were established in Israel and the United States. These include Adin Steinsaltz’s “*Reshafim*” group and the B’nai Or community founded by R. Zalman Schachter-Shalomi.
- 6 Hillel Zeitlin, “*Di ‘bonim*,” *Der moment* (January 14, 1921), 3.
- 7 Idem, “*Vegen hekhre inyonim*,” *Der moment* (January 18, 1935), 4.
- 8 For a first-person account written in 1934 by a participant in one of Zeitlin’s short-lived groups, see YIVO Institute of Jewish Research, RG 4, Folder 3752. The writer of this account, a young man from Warsaw named J. Rot, describes Zeitlin, “the old Don Quixote,” bursting into tears as the group disbanded. On this account, see Rose Waldman, “A Hasid Turns Modern: A YIVO Autobiography,” *In geveb* (January 2016), at <https://ingeveb.org/blog/a-hasid-turns-modern-a-yivo-autobiography-5>.
- 9 Hillel Zeitlin, “*Al Go'alim-Yehidim*,” *Der nayer ruf* 1, no. 4 (June 1939), 5. Very few copies of this journal have survived, and only a single copy, recently discovered at the YIVO Institute of Jewish Research, includes the issue containing Zeitlin’s article. This copy contains issues 1 and 4; we hope that issues 2 and 3, which remain missing, will surface at a later date. The original Hebrew text of the essay will

("The Intenders"), was modeled after the early-twentieth-century Kabbalists of Jerusalem, who spent their days in contemplative prayer in accordance with the rite of R. Isaac Luria and R. Shalom Sharabi [Rashash].¹⁰ If those "intenders" directed their minds, i.e., maintained *kavvana*, toward esoteric permutations of Divine names, Zeitlin's prayer corps derived their spiritual potency specifically from their continued engagement with world affairs. "Armed with knowledge of the world," Zeitlin's "Mekhavnim" were to meditate at length on impending threats to the Jewish people, specifically those posed by the Third Reich, and thus, it was hoped, abrogate the evil decree.

Published three months prior to the German invasion of Poland, Zeitlin's offhand remark that "it is possible, without any degree of prophecy, to know what disasters will befall the Jewish people in the upcoming years" strains under the burden of hindsight. Yet the urgency of the Jewish situation in Europe is apparent throughout the essay. Without a clear political solution at hand, and the doors of immigration largely closed to Polish Jewry, all that was left, it seemed to Zeitlin, was to pray.¹¹ Yet his prayers, for all their hope, were not without grievance toward God over the existential threat posed by Nazi Germany. "It seems," Zeitlin writes in a sample prayer for readers, "as if you have abandoned and turned your back [on the Jewish people] and handed them over to murderers and plunderers who abuse and oppress them in both body and spirit."

From later reports, we know that Zeitlin assembled on at least several occasions a quorum of "Mekhavnim" to pray for salvation. Urbach, who published "On Select Redeemers" in his periodical, concluded his hagiographic history of Zeitlin's life with a gripping account of a real-life gathering of the "Mekhavnim" in Zeitlin's home to which he was invited in the summer of 1939.¹² Hillel Seidman, in his Warsaw Ghetto diary, recalled a similar gathering he attended in the fall of 1941 in which Zeitlin pronounced that redemption was nigh. Zeitlin, it seems, continued to pray until his final day, even, as Seidman observed afterwards,

soon be reprinted in Hillel Zeitlin, *Go'alim Yehidim*, eds. Jonatan Meir and Samuel Glauber-Zimra (Blima Books, forthcoming).

10 On Kabbalah in early-twentieth-century Jerusalem, see Jonatan Meir, *Kabbalistic Circles in Jerusalem (1896–1948)*, trans. Avi Aronsky (Brill, 2016). Zeitlin's relation with these Kabbalists is discussed in *ibid.*, 68–73. Zeitlin was further inspired here by the "pledge of allegiance" (*shetar hitkashrut*), the contract of mutual aid in support of their spiritual mission enacted by the Jerusalem Kabbalists.

11 See Emanuel Melzer, *No Way Out: The Politics of Polish Jewry 1935–1939* (Hebrew Union College Press, 1997).

12 Simcha Bunim Urbach, *Toledot Neshama Ahat: Hillel Zeitlin ha-Ish u-Mishnato* (Shem VeYefet, 1953), 170–171. The entire account is translated into English in Green and Mayse, "The Great Call of the Hour."

“we were not marching toward the Messiah, but rather in the opposite direction.”¹³

In an age of global politics and historical materialism, Zeitlin’s faith in the power of the individual to affect history remained resolute. As a vise closed around Polish Jewry, he continued to preach a religious vision irrevocably bound to individual action, albeit on a spiritual plane. The text below, his last publication in Hebrew before his death in the Holocaust, is a final testament to this vision.¹⁴



On Select Redeemers

Hillel Zeitlin

Translated by Samuel Glauher-Zimra

I.

These past fifteen years (from 1923 onward), and even from several years earlier, I have dreamed of creating a center for “select individuals” (*yehidim*)—“Bonim,” “Yavneh,” “Bnei Heikhala”—and in recent years also “Omek Raz” and others. *None* of these attempts succeeded, and while I still hope and hope, await and await, I will not conceal the truth in my heart that the “select individuals” of whom I have dreamed in *recent* years, especially this *past* year, need to be entirely *different* in their character from the “select individuals” of whom I dreamed in earlier years and to whom I dedicated my book *Sifran shel Yehidim*.¹⁵ The “select individuals” that I have longed

13 Hillel Seidman, *Tog-bukh fun varshaver geto* (Tsentral-farband fun poylishe yidn in amerike, 1947), 113–115. A partial translation of this passage into English appears in idem, *The Warsaw Ghetto Diaries*, trans. Yosef Israel (Targum/Feldheim, 1997), 123. Seidman (1907–1995) was an Orthodox journalist and Agudath Israel activist who studied under Majer Bałaban at Warsaw University, submitting his dissertation in August 1939. His diary records many notable events from the Warsaw Ghetto and includes an eyewitness account of Hillel Zeitlin’s expulsion to Treblinka on Erev Rosh Hashana 5703 (September 11, 1942).

14 Zeitlin’s call for a particular redemption-focused intentional prayer in the face of the existential peril staring down the Jewish people on the eve of the Holocaust is both a fascinating historical response and theological statement. It is not our place here to examine the philosophical implications of his call to prayer just weeks before Hitler’s invasion of Poland, but we do observe that Jewish thought throughout the ages has presented differing potential responses to impending calamity (see, e.g., *Mekhilta* cited by Rashi to Exodus 14:15 as a *locus classicus*).

15 [The frequent italics used for emphasis are all found in Zeitlin’s Hebrew text. We retain them despite the somewhat awkward rendering in English both to produce a faithful sense of the original text and because Zeitlin used emphases to convey in writing something of his notorious intensity, which we wish to preserve. Zeitlin’s forceful personality was described by his contemporaries, both in his lifetime

for in recent years, and *this* year, in particular, must foremost *share in the pain of the Shekhina and redeem the Shekhina from her exile*, praying, praying, praying; praying from the deep depths of the soul, with ceaseless trembling, with an identification with Israel's pain so strong that it does not allow for even a moment's respite.

This echoes the passage in the *Zohar* [cf. *Zohar Hadash* 23b]: “If even one congregation returns in *teshuva*, Israel will be redeemed from its exile”; the remarks of the *Or ha-Hayyim* concerning the establishment of a group of select individuals who enact complete and utter repentance; and the various attempts made already in the days of the Ari [R. Isaac Luria] and, later, the Hida [R. Hayyim Yosef David Azulai]. Alongside all of this, however, *our* “select individuals” must be armed with knowledge of the world, with a knowledge of current geo-political events so extensive that they can track all of the tides swirling against the Jewish people. With this knowledge, as well as knowledge of the supernal demonic forces that abet the enemies of Israel to spread their venom, they must direct their prayers and cry out to God on High to rescue His children from the forces of evil and malice—including the fools misled by their own ignorance—that rise up to attack them.

These select individuals need to know not only what is *being done* to Israel, but also all that *will occur* in the near and distant future, for the Rabbi's statement on the verse “Will thy riches avail, that are without stint [*batzar*]” [Sanhedrin 44b on Job 36:19]—“You needed to offer up *prayer* before the trouble [*tzara*] arrives”—was not only said concerning the troubles of the individual, but also regarding those of the collective. On numerous occasions, I believe, it would have been possible to save the Jewish people from their many travails through well-ordered prayers offered up by individuals worthy of standing before the King of the Universe, standing and beseeching Him to castigate the many accusers and denouncers that come armed with “judgement that will pierce the mountain,” and, empowered by the attribute of “abounding in kindness,” that is, “directed toward kindness,” place mercy before fury to rule in favor of Israel. Yet we remain ignorant and “all of our prayers are like a starling's cry” (*Kuzari* [II:24]), at the very most “a commandment learned by rote” [Isaiah 29:13], and even the *intentions* that we hold [during prayer] are also—“a commandment learned by rote.” We know that we are *commanded* to have proper intention, and we keep in mind the well-known established intentions as we pray and recite blessings, yet our prayers do not *burst forth* from

and after his tragic death, as “storming,” “tempestuous,” etc., and these characteristics carried over into his writing style. Part of this intensity was his frequent use of emphases—he was not writing in a soft or measured tone.]

the heart, they do not issue from the very depths of our being, and all the more so do they not issue from the *spirit* [ru'ah] and *soul* [neshama], and all the more so do they not issue from the *living* [hayya] and *singular* [yehida] aspects [of the soul].

These “select individuals,” with whom I am presently concerned, need to rectify these faults. They must, first and foremost, keep in mind moments or issues that we must pray for in anticipation of this or that future event. Even if these select individuals are not endowed with such a *spirit of prophecy* [ru'ah ha-kodesh] to actually know the future, it is possible with the help of simple human reasoning—if it is sound and cogent—to work out what will happen in the world and to the Jewish people, at the very least in the *upcoming* years.

Take, for example, the “Third Reich.” Was it not possible to know already from the *first* appearance of its instigator and founder all that it would go on to do to elevate its spirit of conquest; humiliate and weaken all the democratic regimes that still harbor some sparks of integrity and aspiration to liberty; and debase and do evil to the Jewish people? It is thus possible, without any degree of prophecy, to know what disasters will befall the Jewish people in the upcoming years. When these select individuals become aware of the calamities facing the world and the Jewish people, who are particularly susceptible to persecution, they must always gather, to cry out and cry out, to protest and protest, to enact complete and utter repentance before God, may He be blessed, and pray and pray until their souls are weary, and yet following this lift themselves up, strengthened and supported by a great hope and complete confidence in God's kindness that have not nor will not run out.

These prayers need to be specific, not generic. Meaning, it is not enough to suffice with the established prayers and penitential rites. Instead, we need in our prayers to enumerate the specific event for which we are praying.

Every facet and deed of these select individuals needs to be directed *solely* toward the spiritual and material redemption of Israel. A practical precondition for this group is that all its members be capable of *concentrated thought*. There are two parts to this condition:

1. These select individuals need to be focused people of settled mind whose thoughts do not wander but rather flow in a particular *direction* and, as much as possible, toward one particular *aim*.
2. They must be capable, when needed, of undertaking special premeditated concentrated mental activity. Meaning, when the need arises to pray for a certain matter, each one of these [select individuals] must divest himself not only of *foreign* thoughts, but

also of *secondary* thoughts. By this I mean that such a person's mind must, over the course of several uninterrupted hours, serve as a vessel for one single thought, in our case, that day's prayer, a great hope for God's kindness, searing pain from the impending evil, and complete confidence in the power of good to ultimately defeat evil.

These select individuals, it goes without saying, must be Torah scholars, complete God-fearers, truly righteous, and, above all else, people of good *character*.

II.

When I think about select redeemers, I always seek the right name for them. In the past, as mentioned above, I have called them "Bonim," "Havrei Yavneh," "Bnei Heikhala," "Havrei Omek Raz." These names reflected the qualities of the select individuals as I imagined them at the time, but they do not in any way fit the select redeemers as I envision them *right now*. I spent a very long time in pursuit of the appropriate name for the group of select redeemers whom I currently seek, yet without any success. The name of any given thing—in particular something eminent, lofty, and sublime—is no mere trifle, for a name must, in one or two words, define a very broad or deep matter. It must delineate, accentuate, and draw special attention to the *novelty* within it.

In the last few days, however, the idea has come into my head to call these select individuals by the name "Mekhavnim" (Intenders). I remembered that in Jerusalem there is a group of Sephardic Kabbalists known as the "Mekhavnim" on account of the fact that they sit all day with the prayer book of the Ari, of blessed memory, open before them. They do not utter even a single word, but instead meditate (*mekhavnim*) on the Ari's *kavvanot* (prayer intentions), drawing together the [Divine] names and ascending in their minds to the highest spiritual realms, gazing deep within those worlds, elevating sparks and bringing down abundance, refining the silver of kindness and purifying the gold of might, subjugating the husks and empowering the holy. The select individuals whom I now seek out will *not* be divested from worldly matters, *nor* will they be so engulfed in distant and lofty worlds like the Sephardic "Mekhavnim" of Jerusalem. For according to my system, only people *who live in the world before us*, who know the world deeply and broadly, who *tangibly* feel the pain of Israel, who identify with the pain of every single Jew and cry out to God with a broken heart—it is only in the power of such people to hasten the coming of the true redeemer whose arrival we eagerly await.

Although these people whom I currently seek out are found *within* the world and busy themselves, like everyone else, with *developing* this

world, I call them by the same name used to refer to the ascetic and isolated Kabbalists of Jerusalem, for they carry out the same demanding labor of the mind, the work of concentration, a verbalized prayer at certain hours, and a prayer in their hearts at nearly every moment of the day—

For the great pain over the troubles and tribulations of Israel and the keen anticipation of salvation need to fill every chamber of these people's souls—

And if they are not capable of arranging their prayers in accordance with the *kavvanot* of the Ari, of blessed memory, after all, then, “God seeks out the heart” [*Zohar* 3:281b], and these people must always yearn and murmur in their hearts: “Please, God, save us! Please, God, save Your people Israel who are subject to contempt and abuse, disgrace and calamity, and even to death and destruction; the small and impoverished nation whom large and mighty nations rise up to cut down and wipe off the face of the earth; the nation to whom You were revealed and in whose midst You placed Your holy spirit, guiding and directing it by this spirit of Yours for thousands of years—and now it seems as if You have abandoned and turned Your back on them, and handed them over to murderers and plunderers who abuse and oppress them in both body and spirit.”¹⁶

If we are not capable of directing all of the *kavvanot* of the Ari, and combining the different forms [of the Divine name], is it not in our power, if we truly desire it, to give true expression to the words of the Psalmist—“And I am prayer” [109:4], I myself, I with my whole being, I with the entire *nefesh, ru'ah, neshama, hayya*, and *yehida* within me, with all of my 248 organs and 365 sinews, spiritual and physical—behold I am entirely prayer, I am entirely longing, thirst, and craving for God's kindness.

III.

I hope that at long last people will be found to establish this modest group. Any readers of the *Nayer ruf* who wish to join this collection of “Mekhavnim,” or to establish their own group of “Mekhavnim,” are requested to contact me by mail,* and I will guide and direct them in accordance with my sense and understanding.

I am not one given to alarm or exaggeration, but I know with full clarity that this small group, if it is established, will expedite our spiritual redemption, and quicken and hasten our path toward the coming of the King Messiah.

16 [The text of this prayer was written by Zeitlin himself, one of many such prayers composed by him.]

* My address: H. Zeitlin, Śliska 60, Warsaw.