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Ritual as Mnemonic: Weaving Jewish Law with Symbolic Networks in *Likkutei Halakhot* by R. Nathan Sternhartz

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Abstract

Ritual has long served as a central axis of religious life, not only structuring practice but also transmitting meaning across generations. This article offers a new perspective on how Hasidic thought reconfigures the medieval Jewish genre of *ta'amei ha-mitzvot*—meanings for the commandments—by transforming halakhah into a sustained mnemonic system for theological transmission and communal continuity. Focusing on Rabbi Nathan Sternhartz's *Likkutei Halakhot*, a 19th-century Hasidic commentary on the Shulḥan Arukh, the study explores how Bratslav Hasidism embeds the kabbalistic teachings of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav within the legal framework of Jewish ritual practice. It argues that Rabbi Nathan developed a distinctive mnemonic strategy that integrates symbolic and theological meaning into halakhic detail, enabling the internalization of Bratslav theology through repeated ritual action. Through close textual analysis, historical contextualization, cognitive theory, and a case study of Kiddushin rituals, this article demonstrates how halakhah becomes not only a vehicle for theological cognition but also a mechanism for sustaining religious identity and memory within a post-charismatic Hasidic community. More broadly, the study contributes to discussions of ritual, memory, and symbolic reasoning in religious life.

Keywords: ritual; Hasidism; kabbalah; commandments; Jewish law (halakhah); mnemonic

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1. Introduction

Nathan Sternhartz (1780–1844), the devoted disciple of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav (1772–1810), the founder of the Bratslav Hasidism, plays a central role in building the Bratslav community after his master's passing (Piekarz 1972, pp. 265–67; Piekarz 2004; Mark 2004; Assaf 2010, pp. 120–22, 148–49; Meir 2016, p. 84, n. 77). In his 19th-century commentary on the codified Jewish law, the *Shulḥan Arukh*, he embedded Rabbi Nachman's teachings to cultivate a comprehensive, life-encompassing commitment to the Hasidic master—and ultimately, to God. This article argues that Rabbi Nathan's symbolic associations created mnemonic aids, internalizing his master's concepts amid Enlightenment challenges, as examined through cognitive theory, historical context, and a Kiddushin case study. His work belongs to the genre of hasidic rationales or meaning of the commandments (Sachs-Shmueli and Goldschmidt 2024). However, while earlier works in this genre primarily seek to offer kabbalistic meanings to the 613 divine commandments derived from the written Torah—though their enumeration and scope may vary—*Likkutei Halakhot* stands out in both scope and structure. The effort to articulate rationales for religious commandments has long been a central concern of Jewish theology (Heinemann 2008; Brown and Herman 2022). From the philosophical justifications of Saadia Gaon and Maimonides to the mystical interpretations of Nahmanides and subsequent kabbalists,

Jewish thinkers have sought to bridge the realm of divine law with broader theological, ethical, and cosmological meaning (Heinemann 2008). The kabbalistic works offering meaning for the commandments, emerging in the 13th century, framed rituals as theurgic acts that influence divine harmony, distinct from biblical rationales tied to natural cycles (Scholem 1965, pp. 118–23; Idel 1988, pp. 59–73). This genre continued to evolve within Hasidic thought, where the challenge of linking concrete ritual practice to inward spiritual transformation took on renewed urgency (Sachs-Shmueli and Goldschmidt 2024; Mayse 2024). While *ta'amei ha-mitzvot* are commonly translated as 'reasons' or 'rationales' for the commandments, I suggest that 'meanings of the commandments' more accurately captures the essence of this literary endeavor. The religious and theological motivation behind these works is not to explain why God issued a particular commandment, nor to justify why one ought to fulfill it—since the obligation to perform the commandments stands independently of any specific rationale. Rather, their aim is to offer a sense of significance to the commandments and *halakhot*: a way for the practitioner to comprehend the meaning of their performance and its impact on the soul, the divine, and the cosmos. In this sense, the term *ta'am*, meaning both 'flavor' and 'meaning', more aptly reflects the purpose and tone of these writings.

Rabbi Nathan structures his work not around the enumeration of the 613 biblical commandments, as is typical of other Hasidic works in the genre of *ta'amei ha-mitzvot* but around the thousands of halakhic rulings formulated by the rabbinic sages and codified in the *Shulḥan Arukh*, the 16th-century legal code compiled by Rabbi Joseph Karo (1488–1575) and subsequently canonized (Ben-Naeh et al. 2021). Drawing on the teachings of his master, Rabbi Nathan develops an expansive interpretive framework that attaches layers of associative networks to the legal rulings of the *Shulḥan Arukh*. This hermeneutical strategy is part of a comprehensive effort by Rabbi Nachman's disciple to canonize his teacher's collection of teachings, *Likkutei Moharan*, which, after the teacher's death, became the living textual conduit for bonding with the tzaddik—the Hasidic leader as a channel for cleaving to God (Horen 2011; Meir 2016; Mandelbaum 2022). This choice distinguishes *Likkutei Halakhot* in several important ways. Structurally, it departs from the commandment-centered format and instead offers commentary on concrete halakhic rulings. In terms of scope, it is by far the most comprehensive work in the Hasidic *ta'amei ha-mitzvot* tradition—spanning multiple volumes—whereas most comparable works consist of a single volume. Conceptually, its focus on halakhot rather than the biblical commandments allows Rabbi Nathan to engage more directly with the practical and ritual dimensions of daily Jewish life. Unlike the biblical commandments, which often center on matters such as sacrificial worship, warfare, and Temple service—areas largely irrelevant to post-Temple Jewish existence—halakhic rulings encompass the full range of ritual, ethical, and communal practices relevant to Jews living in the diaspora. In this way, *Likkutei Halakhot* grounds kabbalistic and Hasidic meaning in the lived texture of contemporary religious life.

Nonetheless, *Likkutei Halakhot* shares several important features with other Hasidic works in this genre. Like them, it draws heavily on kabbalistic symbolism and employs theurgical mechanisms to frame the performance of commandments as acts with metaphysical impact. Rabbi Nathan also incorporates internalized modes of interpretation that emphasize the soul's refinement and the psychological significance of ritual practice—a hallmark of many Hasidic treatments of the commandments. Moreover, as in works such as *Derekh Mitzvotekha*, which preserve the distinctive language and conceptual idioms of Habad thought, *Likkutei Halakhot* is deeply embedded within the Bratslav discursive world. Its hermeneutical method, vocabulary, and symbolic network are all rooted in the teachings and terminology of Rabbi Nachman, thus situating it firmly within the internal language of the Bratslav tradition. While the centrality of the *tzaddik*—and especially the founding

tzaddik—is a recurrent feature in many Hasidic works on the commandments, *Likkutei Halakhot* is exceptional in the systematic bond it constructs between the performance of halakhic practice and the enduring spiritual presence of the deceased master. Rabbi Nathan's project is not only exegetical but also mnemonic and theological: it aims to embed Rabbi Nachman's teachings within the rhythms of Jewish law so as to preserve his authority and revitalize communal identity in the absence of a living leader.

Rabbi Nathan's mnemonic strategy in *Likkutei Halakhot* also served as a pedagogical response to external challenges, such as the Galician Haskalah's critique of Hasidic piety (Margolin 1992), and internal dissent following Rabbi Nahman's death (Assaf 2010; Meir 2016). His project reflects not only a commitment to halakhic fidelity but also an insistence that each ritual detail can serve as a point of access to the symbolic dimensions of Bratslav Hasidism, shaping the practitioner's consciousness. In early Hasidism, rituals functioned as embodied practices that channeled spiritual intention and heightened somatic awareness, transforming the practitioner's perception of self and cosmos (Mayse 2024, p. 117). Commandments, as physical acts, refined the worshipper's sensitivity, opening body, and soul to divine harmony (Mayse 2024, p. 137). However, while some early Hasidic texts—emphasize the general unification of mind, soul, and body through the commandments, they often pay less attention to the specific role of each ritual detail. By contrast, Rabbi Nathan's project represents a more elaborate Hasidic approach, treating each halakhic detail as having a distinct symbolic and spiritual function in the overall purpose of drawing closer to God.

This article argues that Rabbi Nathan's method can be productively understood through the lens of cognitive and mnemonic theory. As Whitehouse (2004, pp. 58–59) proposes: "Transmitting a religion also requires the development of forms of mnemonic support that are costly to maintain in terms of the most basic human resources: labor, time, and energy. A set of viable supports, once established, can bring about appropriate conditions for its propagation." This cognitive approach complements ritual studies perspectives, which view repetitive practices as mechanisms for communal identity formation (Bell 1992), highlighting *Likkutei Halakhot*'s role in sustaining Bratslav cohesion. Whitehouse's framework suggests that Rabbi Nathan's symbolic associations serve as mental scaffolds, enabling practitioners to internalize complex Hasidic teachings through routine halakhic practice. Accordingly, I propose that the symbolic associations he constructs between halakhic rulings and Bratslav teachings form a dense network of analogical links—"X is like Y, and Y is like Z"—designed to embed Rabbi Nahman's concepts into the memory of the practitioner (Boyer 2001). These links function as cognitive codes and mnemonic devices, enabling ritual observance to activate a repertoire of Hasidic meanings without explicit doctrinal instruction. Through repetition, structural parallels, and thematic cross-referencing, *Likkutei Halakhot* fosters a mode of engagement in which the study and performance of commandments become a mechanism for internalising and transmitting the spiritual vision of Rabbi Nahman. Rabbi Nathan linked Rabbi Nahman's principles to daily ritual practice alongside discourses of rare halakhic cases. Throughout *Likkutei Halakhot*, alongside the interweaving of his master's discourse within the fabric of halakhah, he integrates former forms of kabbalistic meaning: theurgical, magical, eschatological, and mystical meanings. As a whole, these applications are designed to embody the principles in daily life, as articulated in his assertion: "It is known that the entire Torah, all its laws and rulings in every section, are meant to provide advice, pathways, and hints to draw closer to God in truth" (Sternhartz 1995a, Introduction).

By foregrounding this mnemonic dimension, the article situates Rabbi Nathan's work not simply as another contribution to the genre of *ta'amei ha-mitzvot*, but as a distinctive strategy of religious pedagogy. His interpretive method offers a case study in how theologi-

cal meaning can be embedded in ritual form—not as an external rationale, but as an internal structure of memory and association that links halakhic practice to a singular authoritative source. Each ritual and halakhic engagement functions as a conduit for memorizing, repeating, and internalizing the canon of the spiritual master, Rabbi Nachman. In other words, the distinctive contribution of *Likkutei Halakhot* lies in its capacity to embed Rabbi Nahman's teachings within specific halakhic contexts. Rabbi Nahman's hermeneutics in *Likkutei Moharan* is highly associative, generating a rapidly unfolding network of symbols within each teaching (Magid 2002, pp. 15–66). Rabbi Nathan integrates these associations into the fabric of halakhic detail, effectively deconstructing the original teaching and reassembling it by linking Rabbi Nahman's symbolic and conceptual motifs to a series of specific halakhic ceremonies and rulings

This integrative function is made explicit in the structure of the work itself: indices added at a later stage map each legal ruling onto a corresponding teaching from *Likkutei Moharan*, signaling a deliberate effort to systematize the connection between halakhic detail and Hasidic doctrine (Sternhartz 1995a). Through frequent repetition and the addition of further analogical links, Rabbi Nathan constructs a symbolic matrix that is designed not only to be interpreted but to be remembered. These repeated associations facilitate a kind of practical retrieval, in which halakhic observance reactivates the broader spiritual and theological teachings of Bratslav Hasidism.

In this way, *Likkutei Halakhot* functions as more than an interpretive companion to Jewish law; it becomes a pedagogical instrument. Each engagement with the halakhah—whether through study or practice—triggers an associative network that reanimates Rabbi Nahman's teachings in the consciousness of the practitioner. This process situates ritual observance within a living memory tradition, one in which halakhic practice serves to sustain the presence of the righteous Hasidic leader (*tzaddik*) and the collective identity of the Bratslav community (Horen 2011). Even when the concept of the tzaddik is not explicitly articulated, this mode of hermeneutics nonetheless links halakhic discourse to the authority of the master.

Ultimately, *Likkutei Halakhot* translates abstract principles into concrete patterns of thought and action. The Rabbi's teachings are not merely appended to ritual obligations but are woven into the very texture of daily life. Through this process, the text aims to foster not only heightened awareness in the performance of commandments but also an ongoing transformation of consciousness. The incorporation of Rabbi Nahman's symbolic universe into the minutiae of halakhic detail is intended to cultivate a mode of piety in which every thought and gesture is anchored in the teachings of the *tzaddik*—thereby shaping the individual into a Hasid not only in belief, but in his way of life.

As previous academic studies have demonstrated, the work serves as a veritable repository for chronicling the historical trajectory of this particular Hasidic movement, encapsulating its core tenet of unwavering faith in the *tzaddik*, its resolute confrontation with the Haskalah, and its distinctive narrative of internal dissent, adversities, theological intricacies, and guiding principles (Piekarz 1972, pp. 197–98, 265–67; Piekarz 2004, pp. 207–11; Assaf 2006, pp. 179–80; Meir 2016; Margolin 1992; Fogel 2019; Hundert 2020). Rabbi Nathan worked on *Likkutei Halakhot* intermittently over 40 years, from 1806 until 2 days before his passing in 1845. The autograph manuscript of his work is preserved in the National Library of Israel (National Library of Israel 1845). This book, alongside others published by Sternhartz, contributed to molding the theology of Bratslav Hasidism and its organization as a Hasidic stream that lives and is defined around the Bratslav library, without a *tzaddik* (Meir 2016, p. 91). After Rabbi Nahman's passing, Rabbi Nathan assumed the leadership and organization of the Bratslav Hasidic movement, despite facing opposition from some of Rabbi Nahman's senior followers. Furthermore, the work's homiletic style,

though lengthy and associative, distils and simplifies the complex and radical concepts rooted in Rabbi Nahman's rich spiritual teaching, making them relevant to rebuilding his community after his passing (Englard 1980; Goshen-Gottstein 2003, pp. 260–67).

2. The Introduction to *Likkutei Halakhot*: Motivation, Cultural Context, Style, and Purpose

Rabbi Nathan's introduction to *Likkutei Halakhot* clearly articulates the work's explicit purpose: to offer practical guidance. He also reflects on his writing style in relation to the goal he set for the book. The content predominantly consists of paraphrases and compilations of Rabbi Nahman's teachings, accompanied by Rabbi Nathan's interpretations. This approach was adopted under the direct guidance of Rabbi Nahman himself, who instructed Rabbi Nathan to engage in halakhic study, which links Rabbi Nahman's spiritual teachings to the halakhic rulings in an associative manner.

The essence and purpose of the book can be seen with one's own eyes, as it is entirely founded and organized around the halakhot found in the four sections of the *Shulḥan Arukh*. For so I was commanded by his holy mouth, to think and contemplate each halakha until God would enlighten my eyes to discover some novel insight within them. And everything that God, blessed be He, granted me the ability to innovate in these matters is entirely based on the principles and foundations that I received from our holy and awesome teacher, of blessed memory, as explained in his holy books, namely *Likkutei Moharan* I and II (Sternhartz 1995a, Introduction).

Likkutei Halakhot prominently features a systematic remolding of Rabbi Nahman's teachings, designed to form a meaningful network of associations that illuminate halakhic passages. Although Rabbi Nathan presents his comments and glosses as marginal interpretations, he nonetheless considers this integrative project one of his key innovations. What, then, is the nature of this innovation? While Rabbi Nathan explicitly acknowledged the "receptive" character of his work—deliberately refraining from introducing new doctrinal principles—the associative links he constructs, and the way he weaves Rabbi Nahman's spiritual teachings into the fabric of halakhic discourse, constitute a distinctive contribution. Through this method, he infuses halakhic rulings with the inner life, or "soul," of Rabbi Nahman's thought.

3. Balancing Exaltation and Comprehension of the Reasons

Rabbi Nathan addresses, in several places in *Likkutei Halakhot*, the concept of engaging with the meanings of the commandments (*ta'amei ha-mitzvot*). Yair Lorberbaum refers to this limitation in comprehending the reasons for the commandments as "exaltation" (*hasgavah*) (Lorberbaum 2020, pp. 27, 31–32). However, unlike those thinkers who view the reasons for the commandments as strictly external and inaccessible to human understanding, for Rabbi Nathan, this limitation does not negate the study of these meanings but rather restricts the extent to which they can be fully grasped (Sternhartz 1995b). The need to explore the meaning of laws and commandments through the lens of Kabbalah and Rabbi Nahman's teachings arises, in part, from the misguided reasoning and heresy Rabbi Nathan saw in his contemporaries. Rhetorically, he references the paradigmatic example of Korach's rebellion. He elaborates on rabbinical sources that illustrate Korach's denial of fundamental Torah principles, challenging Moses on the requirements for tzitzit on a blue garment and questioning the necessity of a mezuzah in a house full of books, showcasing his fundamental rejection of Torah principles (Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 110a; Babylonian Talmud, Menachot 39b). Korach serves as a prototype for the "heretical" and "enlightened" individuals of his time, linking to his earlier discussion of the limitations humans face in understanding the detailed reasons of the commandments:

> This is still found today, as people provide baseless reasons for the commandments, as explained elsewhere. They do not wish to believe that the commandments are an expression of His unity, and that through them, we are bound to Him. Every commandment ascends through all the worlds until the infinite. **However, it is in the details of the commandments** that they falter, unable to find reason in them. (Sternhartz 1995c)

Viewing each specific detail of the commandments and their practical expressions allows for the fulfilment of creation's purpose, encapsulated in the kabbalistic concept as formulated by the sixteenth century kabbalist, Shelomo Elqabt: "the end of action is embedded in the initial thought" (Sternhartz 1995d). This connection of the final physical stage with its higher spiritual source is expressed in kabbalistic terms with an emphasis on the mental focus known as "knowledge" (*da'at*) and "faith" (*emunah*). The response given to the sceptic is that the specific details of laws and statutes are understood as intermediaries of divine reality, functioning as a "constriction of light" (Rubin 2025) that enables intellectual and mental recognition of God, each person according to their level (Sternhartz 1995e).

What is the purpose of creating the network of association and what is the special function of practical performance and the study of their meaning? Rabbi Nathan explicitly discusses the role of the links. The term "counsels" (*etzot*) in relation to the commandments is also mentioned in the introduction to *Likkutei Halakhot* and serves as a title for Rabbi Nahman's book of guidance, *Likkutei Etzot* (Sternhartz 1920). Rabbi Nathan's intention in using the word "counsels" is clearly defined in the following words:

> All commandments are called counsels in the sense of the 613 principles of the Torah, meaning that they are counsels to attain His blessed divinity. Through these counsels, one can transform sins, for the flaws of the counsels prevent knowledge of how to recognize Him, Heaven forbid; on the contrary, one distances themselves from Him and falls into heresies and false beliefs, according to the extent of the flaw and the sin. [. . .] The primary purpose of the commandments is to reach complete faith in order to recognize the One who said, "Let there be light," and whenever a person has a point of faith, they still have hope. (Sternhartz 1995f)

The commandments serve as guidance on how to draw closer to God and achieve complete faith, while disobedience—manifested through sins and transgressions—undermines this closeness and faith. As Tzvi Mark demonstrated, the concept of simple faith (*emunah temimah*) tied to the withdrawal of intellect in Rabbi Nahman's teachings represents a key religious challenge that individuals must strive to attain (Mark 2009, pp. 126–28). Benjamin Brown observed that Rabbi Nahman equated the terms *emunah temimah* (innocent faith) and *emunah peshutah* (simple faith), presenting them as opposites to what he called *emunat hada'at* (intellectual faith), which is based on theological reasoning (B. Brown 2018, pp. 164–73).

The dual aspect of the commandments, "turn away from evil and do good," can be paradigmatically divided into positive and negative commandments. The proximity to God is sometimes framed as faith, but it is also described through the concept of "knowledge," emphasizing the mental aspect (mind and knowledge), and implicitly suggesting an erotic dimension. The common thread between these perspectives is the strong emphasis on mental aspects: to recognize, to know, to believe, and to avoid heresies, as well as the "opposite of knowledge". The opposition of various aspects of reality, reflecting a dualistic perspective, is a core theme in Rabbi Nathan's *Likkutei Halakhot*. This framework positions

the commandments as transformative tools that convert darkness into light, evil into good, and sadness into joy, thereby facilitating a transformation of duality into a unified reality.

The service of God within the physical body is articulated in *Likkutei Halakhot*, using the terminology of the Ba'al Shem Tov prominent disciple, Jacob Joseph of Pollonne (1710–1784). This reflects the human purpose of transforming matter into form (Sachs-Shmueli 2024c, pp. 10–11, 24; Mayse 2024). However, Rabbi Nathan connects the broader principle of Rabbi Yaakov Yosef to the foundational aspect of faith as the ultimate aim of the commandments: to recognize and believe that the vitality of all creation derives solely from God (Sternhartz 1995g). In this light, although Rabbi Nathan emphasizes that the essence lies in the physical performance of the commandments to achieve this transformation, the true focus of the endeavor is cognitive, centered on faith and the recognition of God.

In the transformation of matter into form, an additional cognitive dimension emerges—namely, the power of imagination, which serves as an intermediary between intellect and the material world, facilitating the attainment of the ultimate purpose, which is faith:

> All the commandments are expressed through tangible acts, such as the tzitzit, tefillin, and the four species, in order to connect all materiality to its roots. This connection forms the foundational principle of the entire Torah: to link and incorporate the physical realm into the ultimate essence of spirituality, so that everything can be included in its root within the Blessed One. The performance of all commandments is executed through the imagination, which acts as the envoy of the intellect. The intellect, in itself, is distant from the physical manifestations; it is the intellect that instructs the imagination to carry out the commandments in a tangible manner. Thus, there is truly no rational basis in human intellect for any commandment [. . .] Through this process, faith becomes clarified, enabling us to fulfil all the commandments. The imaginative faculty becomes further refined, as from it emanates a deeper understanding of faith. Consequently, we become included in the essence of the inner intellect, in the Blessed One, as it is said, "And I will betroth you to Me in faith, and you shall know the Lord". (Sternhartz 1995h)

Here, Rabbi Nathan articulates the purpose of the commandments as the refinement of one's imaginative faculty through the submission of one's will to the divine will. This submission is demonstrated in the performance of the commandments, which is grounded in faith rather than rational reasoning. Thus, the engagement with the *ta'amei ha-mitzvot* is less about providing justifications for the law and more about facilitating a process of spiritual refinement. It aims to enhance the internal transformation embedded within the precepts, fostering a deeper alignment between human practice and divine intent.

4. The Structure of Hermeneutics

In *Likkutei Halakhot*, each halakha begins with a citation from the *Shulḥan Arukh*, followed by a discourse from *Likkutei Moharan* intended to elucidate its meaning and significance. At first glance, the juxtaposition of the two often appears disparate, with the idea drawn from *Likkutei Moharan* seemingly unrelated to the halakhah. Resolving this apparent disjunction and revealing the intrinsic connection between the law and Rabbi Nahman's discourse becomes a central homiletical aesthetic that Rabbi Nathan employs in his commentary.

Moreover, this method underscores Rabbi Nathan as a creative exegete towards his master's teaching. While his materials are heavily drawn from the teachings of his mentor, Rabbi Nahman, his originality lies in his ability to weave these teachings into unexpected connections with halakhot. His creativity, therefore, is less about generating new content

and more about forging links between seemingly disparate concepts. In many instances, these connections offer a fresh perspective on ancient rituals, revitalizing their meaning and imbuing them with renewed significance.

The halakhah is then explored through various images, symbols, and sayings from Rabbi Nahman in the primary discourse related to it, as well as elaborations from other teachings of Rabbi Nahman. Additionally, Rabbi Nathan incorporates references to Talmudic teachings, Zoharic references, and occasionally Lurianic ideas. While Talmudic and Zoharic teachings are usually cited directly, Lurianic concepts are often mentioned as known ideas without specific references. Other Kabbalists or Hasidic authorities are rarely mentioned. This hermeneutical method weaves a network of symbols and associations that illuminates fundamental Bratslav values and principles, positioning them as a direct continuation of the teachings of the sages and the *Zohar*, positioning Rabbi Nahman as the ultimate interpretive descendant of these traditions. Frequently, Rabbi Nahman's more metaphorical or unconventional ideas are reinterpreted within a more traditional and conservative framework and rendering them a practical dimension (Sachs-Shmueli 2024a, pp. 347–71; Sachs-Shmueli 2025, pp. 143–65). However, in other halakhot, such as the commandment to multiply, he primarily expounds on the general rationale of the commandments without delving into its details, and draws connections to other elements within Rabbi Nahman's teachings (Sternhartz 1995i).

Often Rabbi Nathan offers specific explanations for a sequence of practical elements in performing the commandment, in much more detail than the more common attitude in the genre of kabbalistic rationales for the commandments, which usually focus on the overarching mechanism. However, unlike Rabbi Isaac Safrin of Komarno or Tzvi Elimelekh of Dynov, who include detailed halakhic discussions and independent rulings for each commandment before delving into the mystical aspects, Rabbi Nathan does not develop his own halakhic rulings (Mayse 2019; Goldschmidt 2022, pp. 316–19; Sachs-Shmueli 2024b). Instead, he interweaves the practical details within his broader rationale in an associative manner, linking them through a theosophical chain of symbols. When these halakhic elements are mentioned throughout his discourse, he does not participate in legalistic discussion in a manner of *pilpul*, but only mentions in general the practical requirement or halakhic detail in order to charge it with the symbolic meaning.

5. The Marriage Ceremony

I will now demonstrate Rabbi Nathan's hermeneutic method through the symbolic interpretation he offers for the ceremony of *Kiddushin* (betrothal) (Sternhartz 1995j). Marriage and procreation already held immense kabbalistic significance in the Zoharic corpus—emphasizing the sanctification of family life and the purification of sexuality, particularly in the context of medieval Spain—and were further developed in sixteenth-century Safed (Mopsik 1993; Idel 2005; Haskell 2010; Wolfson 2016). Nevertheless, Rabbi Nathan introduces a notable innovation by providing symbolic meaning for each specific detail of the ceremony. In his commentary on the halakhot of *Kiddushin*, he addresses various ritual elements, including the celebratory meal, the blessing over a cup of wine, the presence of two witnesses, and even the Hasidic custom of shaving the bride's hair. His interpretive framework constitutes an appropriation and extension of Rabbi Nachman's teaching in *Likkutei Moharan* I:67. Rabbi Nathan subordinates legal discussion to symbolic association, embedding Rabbi Nachman's teachings within the rituals of *Kiddushin*. Rabbi Nahman there reorients the Kabbalistic framework of the feminine sefirah—Kavod (honor), Malkhut (kingdom), and Tzedek/Tzedakah (justice/charity)—as the source of human souls, emphasizing an interiorized moral process of self-scrutiny. He warns that receiving Kavod may signal the soul's (*Nefesh*) departure to its divine source unless purified through holiness.

Through associative hermeneutics, he links this to *tikkun ha-akhilah* (purification of eating), where uncontrolled desires (*ta'avat achilah*) damage Kavod, empowering the demonic other (*Sitra Achara*) and causing the concealment of divine presence, while disciplined eating restores the divine presence (*nesiat panim*) (Mark 2003, pp. 415–52; Hecker 2025). Braided hair (*se'arot klu'in*) expels extraneous forces (*motarot*), purifying *Da'at* (knowledge). The soul's birth and nurturing occur through Yirah (fear) and Ahavah (love), symbolized by two hands. R. Nachman's teaching rich in Kabbalistic symbols, is not tied to specific halakhot but serves as a universal call for spiritual rectification.

Rabbi Nathan adapts Rabbi Nachman's associative method to the halakhot of *Kiddushin*, using key terms (e.g., *Kavod*, *Tzedakah*) as mnemonic triggers for his master's teachings. On one level, he emphasizes the classical kabbalistic idea that the bride embodies the feminine aspect of the divine; on another, he presents the ceremony as a symbolic process of the soul's moral purification and rebirth. Each stage of the ritual is mapped onto a corresponding step within Rabbi Nachman's symbolic network. Rabbi Nathan's innovation lies in transforming abstract kabbalistic motifs into concrete ritual cues, embedding Rabbi Nachman's ethical discourse within the legal framework of marriage without restating it explicitly. In his treatment of the halakhot of *Kiddushin*, he links individual rulings to R. Nachaman's symbolic network, in a way that constructs the ceremony as a rectification process of the feminine *sefirah* (Malkhut) and the restoration of *kavod* (honor) to the soul. The first trajectory reflects the dominant theurgical orientation that emerged from the 13th century onward, interpreting the commandments through a mythic framework centered on the sacred union (*hieros gamos*) between the masculine divine (Kudsha Brikh Hu) and the feminine presence (Shekhinah). This symbolic structure has been examined by scholars such as Mopsik (2005, pp. 128–49), Idel (2005, pp. 1–2, 59–77, 214–17), and Wolfson (2007, pp. 145–84). In contrast, the second trajectory, which centers on the individual practitioner, marks the Hasidic turn toward the inward, subjective dimension of religious life. Furthermore, he integrates both halakhic rulings and Hasidic customs—such as the cutting of the bride's hair—into a theurgical narrative that underscores the restoration of the divine couple and the purification of human action. While we have testimonies that Hasidic woman shaved their hair before marriage, and various kabbalistic justifications were offered, this seems to be a middle 19th century custom (Dynner 2015, pp. 120–21; I. Brown 2024). Through his teaching, Rabbi Nathan transforms legal prescriptions into mnemonic aids for the memorization of these kabbalistic symbols. The following table (Table 1) illustrates this approach by detailing the halakhic requirements of the Kiddushin ceremony and their corresponding symbolic meanings, drawn directly from Rabbi Nathan's commentary. Each ritual is shown to facilitate a process of sanctification (*kedushah*), aligning human actions with divine unity (*yichud*) and the expulsion of negative forces (*sitra achara*).

When reading Rabbi Nathan of Nemirov's discourse alongside that of his master, it becomes clear that Rabbi Nathan links halakhic rituals and Hasidic customs to kabbalistic symbols, constructing them as mnemonic devices designed to align human actions not only with divine processes but also with the ongoing rectification of the soul. Within the kabbalistic framework echoed here, the rituals of marriage (e.g., kiddushin, chuppah) and related practices (e.g., fasting, Grace) reflect the rectification of the feminine tenth sefirah, often called *Malkhut* (kingdom), *Tzedek* (justice), or *Kavod* (honor). This sefirah is embodied both by the bride and internalized within each practitioner's soul and self-honor. Each ritual elevates Malkhut from a state of lack (e.g., poverty) to a full image (*panim*), fostering both the divine union (*yichud*) and the soul's spiritual rebirth. Furthermore, even the controversial Hasidic practice of shaving the bride's hair before its cover is charged with this symbolic network (Dynner 2015, pp. 120–21; I. Brown 2024). The rituals thus serve as

practical steps to offer rectification, expel negative forces (*sitra achara*), and rectify the soul of the practitioners.

Table 1. Table for Kiddushin rituals according to Rabbi Nathan's adaptation of Rabbi Nahman's *Likkutei Moharan*, Torah 67.

Ritual	Halakhic Detail	Symbolic Meaning
Fasting	Bride and groom on their marriage day	Fasting corrects eating desires, enabling a spiritual face-to-face union in holiness.
Kiddushin by Money	Groom gives a coin to the bride, saying, "Behold, you are consecrated to me," with two witnesses.	The act of granting a money value object elevates the bride from a diminished and shattered state of justice—femininity lacking its masculine counterpart (*tzedek*)—to a state of righteousness (*tzedakah*), preparing her to stand "face to face" with the male.
Chuppah	Marriage ceremony under a canopy, followed by a festive meal.	The chuppah embodies Kavod as the soul's source, facilitating *holadat hanefesh* (soul birth) through sanctified eating, triggering moral rectification of Malkhut.
The Marriage Dinner	Eating a festive meal is a *mitzvah*, performed after the chuppah.	The meal enacts *tikkun ha-akhilah*, symbolizing sanctified eating and sexual union, enabling a divine union of *panim be'panim* (divine union).
Grace after Meals	Reciting Grace with a cup of blessing after eating, ideally with three people.	The *kos shel berachah* and *zimun* perfect Malkhut through sanctified eating, invoking *nesiat panim* and Tzedakah's moral invitation to holiness.
Seven Blessings	Seven blessings recited under the chuppah and during festive meals.	Blessings channel divine influence through Yirah and Ahavah (hands), enabling soul birth and nurturing, recalling moral purification of the *Nefesh*.
Bride's Braiding and Haircutting	Bride's hair is braided, cut, and covered before the chuppah.	Braiding the hair allows the extraneous forces (*kelipot*) to draw off the remaining impure energies (*motarot*), which are then expelled through the act of haircutting. Covering the hair afterward serves to protect and preserve the state of *kavod* (honor) that has been attained through this entire process.

While *Likkutei Halakhot* stands in continuity with other Hasidic works of *ta'amei ha-mitzvot*, it introduces a distinctive hermeneutical and mnemonic strategy. Like its predecessors, it is deeply theurgical—grounded in kabbalistic logic, and like his contemporaries it is enriched by Hasidic emphases on inward soul-correction and moral refinement (Sachs-Shmueli 2024b)—but it departs from them in its level of exegetical detail and structural coherence. Each stage and object of ritual is framed through a unique symbolic and conceptual lens. What sets Rabbi Nathan's work apart is the consistent effort to anchor every halakhic element in a specific teaching of Rabbi Nachman, thereby creating a tightly woven symbolic network in which no ritual detail stands alone. Unlike most Hasidic texts that draw on a diverse range of sources and mystical traditions, the entire symbolic system in *Likkutei Halakhot* is built almost exclusively on the teachings and authority of Rabbi Nachman. In this way, each halakhic act evokes a precise node in a theological chain linked to the spiritual master's voice and vision.

The theological significance of this mnemonic structure lies in its capacity to render halakhic practice a site of continuous encounter with the *tzaddik*. Beyond the specific spiritual or theurgical meanings assigned to individual commandments, the mnemonic network as a whole serves to create an enduring bond between the Hasid and Rabbi Nachman—during study, as the practitioner internalizes the system of associations, and throughout daily life,

as each object and gesture calls forth the master's teaching. Theologically, this framework positions the *tzaddik* not merely as the origin of the system, but as its sustaining presence: halakhah becomes a medium through which Rabbi Nachman remains spiritually operative, guiding the Hasid's consciousness and practice in the absence of his physical presence. In this way, Rabbi Nathan transforms halakhic observance into a living conduit for Bratslav theology, ensuring the continuity of charismatic authority through ritualized memory.

6. Conclusions

Likkutei Halakhot constitutes a pivotal contribution to Bratslav Hasidism, offering a distinctive method of integrating halakhic practice with the teachings of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav. Rabbi Nathan Sternhartz constructs a dense network of associations in which ritual observance becomes a mnemonic framework, linking halakhic detail to kabbalistic symbols rooted in the authority of the master, R. Nahaman's *Likkutei Moharan*. In this schema, each *mitzvah*—whether eating matzah or donning tzitzit—functions as a cognitive and affective prompt, reconnecting the practitioner to divine meaning as mediated through the *tzaddik*'s teachings.

Part of a longstanding Jewish tradition of rationalizing commandments, *Likkutei Halakhot* stands out for its systematic effort to embed Hasidic teachings within halakhic discourse. The interpretive strategies deployed throughout *Likkutei Halakhot* span symbolic, theurgical, eschatological, mystical, moral, and pedagogical registers. While grounded in traditional theurgic aims—such as uniting divine realms or averting spiritual harm—Rabbi Nathan's emphasis increasingly turns to the inner life of the practitioner. Ritual becomes a means of cultivating *da'at*, strengthening faith, and shaping consciousness in accordance with divine will.

By grounding mystical ideals in halakhic precision, Rabbi Nathan bridges the esoteric and the normative. Each *mitzvah* serves as a point of convergence between metaphysical intention and embodied action, thereby transforming halakhah into a site of cognitive, emotional, and spiritual formation. In this way, *Likkutei Halakhot* not only sustains Bratslav Hasidism in a post-*tzaddik* era but also redefines halakhic practice as a theologically rich mode of religious life.

Beyond Bratslav Hasidism, Rabbi Nathan's mnemonic approach offers a model for how religious traditions can adapt esoteric teachings to normative practice, a strategy relevant to contemporary theological efforts to bridge ritual and meaning. His work invites further exploration of how cognitive and mnemonic theories can illuminate the transmission of religious identity across traditions.

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