

**Sandu Frunză, Mihaela Frunză (Editors)**

**Essays in Honor of Moshe Idel**

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Cluj-Napoca

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# Introductory Note

Moshe Idel is one of the most creative personalities of the Jewish culture. His thinking influences research in Jewish mysticism, history of religions, hermeneutics, philosophical reflection, cultural studies in general and Romanian studies in particular.

By belonging to two cultures, Israeli and Romanian, Moshe Idel incarnates a human type of border, forged at the encounter of two cultural spaces and meant to embrace in his creativity the plural dimensions of a continuously tormented world.

His work was translated into many languages, including Romanian, a language Idel masters skillfully. This work triggered the most diverse reactions among specialists and is still open to new interpretations and valorizations. Despite the fact that some of his texts have already been included in the canon of the fields to which they belong, Moshe Idel is an author whom we expect to produce from now on his most authoritative works in those research directions where he has opened new ways of interpretation and new relations to the religious and cultural phenomena. It is obvious we are facing an *opera aperta* and we can only guess what will come next.

The present volume wants only to highlight Idel's work in its current format. It contains the texts in honor of Moshe Idel in the special issue of the *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies* (JSRI 18 Winter 2007) to celebrate his sixtieth anniversary.

The volume brings to discussion first and foremost Moshe Idel's contribution to the study of religion and Jewish thought, and also some general theoretical issues in the study of Jewish mysticism and other complementary topics in Jewish studies related to the subjects developed by Moshe Idel in his works.

The initiator of this attempt of bringing to public attention some of the debates around Idel's work is the *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies* that published the current issue following a long and complicated selection process.

J.S.R.I. is an international publication of S.C.I.R.I. (The Seminar for Interdisciplinary Research of Religions and Ideologies) and S.A.C.R.I. (The Academic Society for the Study of Religions and Ideologies). SCIRI is an international group formed by young researchers from BBU Cluj and from other Romanian and foreign universities. SACRI is a professional association that includes an international group of researchers dedicated to the interdisciplinary research of religious studies.

J.S.R.I. is an open-access journal published on the internet ([www.jsri.ro](http://www.jsri.ro)) with three issues per year. It is a peer-review academic publication intended for professors and young researchers interested in the study of religions and ideologies. J.S.R.I. encourages interdisciplinary approaches engaging the following domains: interreligious dialogue, philosophy of religions, political philosophy and political science, ethics, religious studies, anthropology, sociology, educational science and communication theory.

JSRI is currently indexed by Thompson Reuters in ISI Web of Knowledge (Arts& Humanities Citation Index and Current Contents: Arts& Humanities). It is also included in other prestigious international databases, such as DOAJ, SCOPUS, EBSCO, ProQuest, JGate, Wabash and others, being covered in a large number of libraries of the entire world.

Following the success it had in the online version, JSRI proposes the present volume as a way of bringing to the attention of its readers, once more, the reflections of several of the most important researchers in a few fields distinct from Jewish studies. The editors wish to thank the authors included in this volume, and especially Jonathan Garb, for the constant support granted in the preparation of this issue. The editors pay special gratitude to Horatiu Crisan and to the other members of the editorial board and of the advisory board for their contribution to the continuous development of JSRI. Our journal is the result of the common efforts of an international group of scholars.

The Editors

# MICHAEL FISHBANE

## Spiritual Transformations of Torah in Biblical and Rabbinic Tradition

### **Abstract:**

The article deals with changing conceptions of Torah in the formative two phases of Jewish tradition. The first major transformation in the Hebrew Bible is the 'arcanization' (Idel's term) or esotericization of the subject. This occurs through the use of an old term for divinization (the verbal stem *darash*) for exegetical inquiry into the meaning of Torah (Ezra 7: 9-10). The second is the 'spiritualization' of Torah, evident in the transfer to it of verbs used with respect to relationship with God (see Psalm 119). a notable transformation in early rabbinic texts is the role of study as a substitute for ritual action.

In his many important contributions to Jewish thought, history, and tradition, spanning the entire cultural spectrum – from ancient rabbinic antiquity to early modern Jewish culture – Moshe Idel has opened many new vistas with penetrating insights and analyses. In particular, his scholarly works are marked by striking phenomenological insights that give deep comparative structures to his detailed philological work, organizing the material in unexpected patterns which illumine internal and interdisciplinary dimensions of the subject at hand; and they are also marked by methodological insights and applications that construct new models for the material at hand. One of the most challenging and valuable dimensions of this, integrating both of these two dimensions (the phenomenological and the methodological), is Idel's claim that many later features of Jewish mystical literature and culture (medieval and early modern), characterizing its theological and spiritual mentality, have their roots and initial formations in antiquity. By this I do not simply mean his striking observations that notions like the feminine divine Presence, or Shekhinah, finds ancient reflexes (and perhaps preformations) in ancient Near Eastern sources dealing with goddess (like the occurrence of the comparable term *shikintu* in old Mesopotamian texts), or even that one of the medieval terms for the divine 'form', or *tzurah*, has antecedents in designations of the very same sort in the

Dead Sea scrolls. Rather, I have in mind the singular and valuable insights that so-called Gnostic elements in medieval Jewish sources (like the book of *Bahir* or the book of *Zohar*) are already found in ancient Jewish theological elements, as part of the vast theological dimension of rabbinic antiquity; and that various theological dynamics, like the empowering or weakening of the divine Reality or Structure (called in antiquity, the *Gevurah* or Power on High) through ritual behavior, so characteristic of medieval texts, is already evidenced in a variety of rabbinic sources, which must therefore be appreciated in such concrete theological ways. Through these and other insights, Idel has taken the old technical designation 'Kabbalah' (Tradition) with full seriousness, and found new scholarly ways of reinforcing the claims of the medieval adepts that Jewish mystical traditions are of hoary antiquity, and that they were transmitted continuously by mystical teachers into the Middle Ages and beyond. Thus, in contrast to certain scholarly opinions that have had a wide impact, Idel has opened our eyes to the important dimension of native continuity in mystical traditions, and shown that assumptions of breaks and alien imports often distort the picture and are presumptuous. This is a contribution of singular cultural importance.

One of the domains of Jewish religious culture that Idel has illumined is that of Scriptural interpretation – both through detailed studies of medieval mystical hermeneutics (especially), but also by organizing these features into phenomenological structures and historical patterns. His recent work *Absorbing Perfections. Kabbalah and Interpretation* is a vast, compendious treatise filled with historical examples, methodological insights, and sharpened by insights stressed in several modern works of philosophical hermeneutics and semiology<sup>1</sup>. All this is vintage Idel, as is his frequent attempt to point out the ancient biblical and other roots of certain elements. In this regard, he referred to an earlier observation of mine regarding a new oracular dimension given to the study of Torah in antiquity<sup>2</sup>. I should like to return to this matter here, as my contribution to this collection of studies in Idel's honor, and to expand upon the citation which he adduced from my work and to develop other aspects of this important subject. Two features will emerge. The first are preformations (through the transfer to the study of Torah of a kind of oracular inquiry) of that feature of Torah and its interpretation in Kabbalah which Idel has termed the '*arcanization*' of the subject (that is, the transformation of Torah and its contents into a medium of secret and esoteric wisdom); the second is a distinct spiritual transformation of the process of 'inquiry' into Torah – that is, the transformation of study into a pious, spiritual exercise, this being something we may refer to as its '*interiorization*'. In the first instance, I would like to show that

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1 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

2 *Ibid*, 216, citing my *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 245 (as printed, the citation omits the key reference to Ezra 7:10, to be supplemented below).

these two features (both transformations of much significance for the subject) have their precursors in the Hebrew Bible. Analysis of the materials opens up a significant dimension of biblical religiosity and religious mentality. I shall then follow-up certain aspects of the subject with reference to classical rabbinic Midrash. Without going over the same ground, I shall adduce a significantly new development which is only understandable in light of earlier transformations, and which must be duly appreciated for a proper understanding of the nature of Torah in Jewish religious history. I offer these comments to celebrate the great scholarship of Moshe Idel and to reinforce his many insights into the origins and preformations of Jewish spiritual attitudes and orientations.

1.

In order to put the subject of 'Torah' in biblical antiquity into context, it behooves us first to review several contours of its nature and occurrences. In the course of time, these elements come together in significant ways. So we may first ask: What is Torah and its instruction(s) in the major genres of Scripture?

We begin with the Priestly literature and its traditions. In this corpus, the noun *torah* refers to a specific ritual or cultic instruction, or better, to a specific domain of priestly concern and activity. *Torah* is thus literally an 'instruction' bearing on the priestly concern for purity and holiness, and for the separation of the holy and profane – as we are told in a comprehensive way in Leviticus 10: 10 f, where Moses informs Aaron that both he and his lineage are duty bound "to make a separation between the holy and the profane, and between the impure and the pure, and to instruct (*le-horot*) the Israelite people all the statutes which the Lord their God spoke via Moses". These matters are taken up in considerable detail in Leviticus 11-15, which delineates the *torah* of permitted and forbidden foods and their separations (ch. 11; note the colophon at vv. 26 f); the *torah* pertaining a childbearing woman and the regulations of her impurity and purification (ch. 12; and note the colophon at vv. 7-8); the *torah* pertaining to the diagnosis, containment, and purification of skin lesions, scabs, and discolorations, and also types of related infections and 'plagues' affecting cloths and building of various materials (chaps. 13-14, and the colophons at 13: 59 14: 54-57); and the *torah* dealing with male and female fluxes and emissions (ch. 15, and the colophon at vv. 32 f.). Elsewhere the priestly texts delineate a "*torah statute*" dealing with the purification of persons defiled by corpses (Numbers 19: 2, and vv. 3-13), and the *torah* dealing with a person who dies in a tent, and the various potential miasma and purification rites pertaining thereto (vv. 14-22)<sup>3</sup>.

3 For these and other colophons, and their text-critical implications, see my discussion, "On Colophons, Textual Criticism and Legal Analogies", in *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 42 (1980), 438-49.

Such instructions are provided the priests in detail. Presumably such rules and more were the types of technical matters referred to by Moses, when, in an old poetic designation, he states that Levi (and his descendants), “shall instruct (*yoreh*) Jacob with laws and Israel with Your (God’s) *torah*” (Deuteronomy 33: 10). But it is not possible to determine from this passage if the *torah* referred to has a comprehensive sense (including judicial matters), or whether it only refers to those specific ritual matters which the priests might adjudicate or diagnose. The designation found in Jeremiah 18: 18 is similarly ambiguous, in its warning that through disobedience that people are subject to the loss of leadership and instruction – stating that the sinful people will suffer an absence of “*torah* from the priest, *davar* (oracular word) from the prophet, and *etzah* (counsel) from the wise”. Certainly such a tripartite division is most striking with regard to the forms of instruction and instructors highlighted; and whatever the scope, the context suggests that the priests deal with matters already revealed as divine *torah*, as against new prophetic oracles or teachings of natural wisdom. According to a probably contemporaneous tradition recorded in the book of Deuteronomy, we learn that *shoftim ve-shotrim* (judges and magistrates) were to be set up in the various locals to “judge (*ve-shafetu*) the people with due justice (*mishpat*)” (Deut. 16: 18); whereas in baffling or difficult cases, bearing on capital or civil rulings, as well as torts and injuries, one should go to a higher authority – namely, to “the levitical priests or the judge” (or magistrate) of that time, and “seek out” (*ve-darashta*) a legal ruling from them (17: 8-9); and that one should then carry out the verdict delivered, enacting all that the judges “instruct you” (*yorukha*), “in accordance with the *torah*-instruction which they instruct you and the ruling (*mishpat*) handed down” (vv. 10 f). In these complex cases, the priests or magistrates administer public rulings and their provisions – designated as *torah* instructions of a specific type<sup>4</sup>.

It would seem from the context that there is an expansion of the term *torah* here, to cover the administration or technical execution of the judicial rulings – though it is certainly possible that the double designation of *torah* and *mishpat* may distinguish ritual from other adjudications. In any event, the decisions of *torah* (by priests or others) are reached through some ratiocinative or customary procedure. There is no reason to assume otherwise from these texts, even if the *mishpat* announced by the Levites is oracular in some cases (as we may deduce from Exodus 29: 30). By contrast, in the late post-exilic prophecy of Malachi, we are clearly told that the people “seek out (*yivaqshu*) *torah*” from the mouth of the priestly Levite, “because he is a messenger (angel) of the Lord of hosts” (Mal. 2: 6-7). Clearly in this setting the ‘seeking out’ referred is oracular in nature

4 For a consideration of the text, and the possibility of diverse judicial elements integrated herein, see M. Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 235 f.

(as also in Ezekiel 7: 28). This mantic dimension of priestly torah-instruction is thus linked to the medium-like personal status of the Levites. Other post-exilic sources will similarly introduce an oracular dimension to *torah* learning, but will locate this elsewhere. It is to this that we now turn.

The point of departure is the book of Deuteronomy. Just previously, we observed that in puzzling cases the people (or local administrators) were to go to higher courts and 'seek out' a remedy or ruling. The verb used is *darash*, with the sense of an 'application' or 'searching' for a decision. As noted, in this setting the verb has a human, deliberative quality. Similar usages occur also in Deuteronomy 16: 4, in cases dealing with the examination of evidence dealing with persons accused of false worship. The formulation is given in a more expansive way in 13: 15, in connection with persons inciting others to false worship, and there is no doubt that it involves a careful scrutiny and 'inquiry' of evidence and details. Such a ratiocinative aspect reflects the larger emphasis in Deuteronomy on wisdom and rational procedures. And thus it is instructive to compare this material with the earlier traditions of legal remedies found in the book of Exodus – specifically the change in procedure indicated in chapter 18. In that setting we are told that Moses sat "from morning to night" administrating justice. He explains his actions to Jethro his Midianite father-in-law, telling him that when the nation comes "to seek out (*lidrosh*) God", they come to him and he "judges" their cases and informs them of "the statues of God and his torahs" (vv. 15-16). Certainly, the sense of the text is that Moses functions as a legal medium or sorts, administering divine justice through his own person. Upon hearing this, Jethro suggests a more viable plan, and proposes upright and God-fearing persons to serve as magistrates who will deal with the easier cases, and only the difficult ones would come before Moses. This hierarchical structure of adjudication stands behind its repetition and explication in Deuteronomy 1: 9-18 – where, however, the judicial innovation is presented without reference to foreign suggestion, the appointees are specified as "wise, sage, and knowledgeable", and there is no reference to people seeking out god or Moses functioning as a judicial medium (rather, Moses 'hears the cases and commands the verdicts to be complied with). Surely the same 'rational' spirit pervades this revision as occurs in Deuteronomy 17, which now appears as an instantiation in the settlement period of the hierarchical judiciary founded in the desert and pre-settlement periods.

This focus on deliberative, investigative clarification affects the nature of Torah itself. In the book of Deuteronomy, the bulk of priestly *torah*-instructions are deleted (with the exception of the rules of permitted foods, truncated and slightly revised in ch. 14), and it is now only the entire corpus of divine instructions that is called a 'Torah'. Indeed, at the very outset, we are told that at the end of the desert sojourn Moses said to the people "all that the Lord had commanded" (Deut. 1: 4),

and that he then began “to explain (*be'er*) all this Torah” to the people (v. 5). The deictic reference (“this”) is prospective of course, and points to the various teachings which follow; but it is noteworthy that the entire sum of it is now designated a Torah, and that it is all subject to the exegetical clarification by Moses. This latter instruction is not the product of either inspiration or revelation, but the result of rational pedagogy, as appropriate to the issue at hand. But the Torah corpus is not limited to technical explication, and can also serve as spiritual instruction – as we may observe from ch. 17: 18-20, where it is stated that a king should transcribe a copy of this Torah and “read from it all his life, that he learn to fear the Lord his God, to observe all the words of this Torah ..., and that he not raise his heart (pridefully) over his compatriots ...” The emphasis on knowledge of the law and the inducement of proper piety is stressed here, and one may assume that what the Torah is meant to do for the king it is also meant to do for all the people. The case of the king, and his transcription and study of the Torah is thus emblematic for everyone. The study of the Torah and its explication, as well as the piety to be derived from its teachings, is thus all highlighted by the book of Deuteronomy. As the work itself indicates, this instruction “is not in heaven”, but “near” to the people, as something accessible – to be put in their heart for practical study and religious guidance (Deut. 30: 11, 14). In the larger context of Deuteronomy, and its focus on ratiocinative praxis and wisdom, this coda is not exceptional. The distinctive ideology occurs elsewhere.

The significant shift in these matters is observable in a key post-exilic text. In it, earlier and late traditions of consulting (or ‘seeking’) a medium-like individual for divine instruction (*torah*) merges with the practice of studying Torah and of investigating (or ‘seeking explication’) legal or other cases (called both *torah* and *mishpat*) for an actionable verdict. The result is the study or consultation of the Torah as a medium of divine truths and teachings. This exegetical arcanization of Torah is strikingly recorded in Ezra 7: 9-10, where we learn that Ezra the priest, at the beginning of the people’s return from Babylonian exile (following the decree of Cyrus in 539 B.C.E.), “set his heart to consult (*lidrosh*) the Torah of the Lord (*torat YHWH*), to do and to teach law and statute in Israel”. The construction is as unexpected as it is striking. It is axial in every cultural sense. Two phrases are blended here. The first, indicating ‘the setting of one’s heart’ or mind (*hekhin lev*), is found especially in late sources to indicate a pious orientation, as noted for example regarding King Hezekiah, who we are informed, “set his heart to seek God (*lidrosh ha-elohim*)” (2 Chronicles 30:19). The spiritual aspect of this is undoubted and the writer of Ezra 7: 10 may capitalize on its resonance; but the particularly innovative element, most surely intended, is the use of the verb *darash* in connection with the Torah. Significantly, early mantic sources speak of a person going to “seek” a divine oracle, in connection with some difficult personal or national matter. Thus (leaving aside the consultation of God through Moses for juridical purposes in Exodus 18),

we note that Rebecca in her travail goes *lidrosh et YHWH* (Genesis 25: 23); that King Jehoshaphat in his quandry whether to join a military alliance asks the king of Israel to “please consult (*derosh na*) this day the oracle of YHWH” (1 Kings 22 5); and that King Josiah, having initiated Temple repairs in a fit of piety, was informed that a Torah book was found and in his consternation as the priests to “consult the Lord (*dirshu et YHWH*) ... regarding words of the scroll” (2 Kings 22: 13). Exactly how these oracular consultations were conducted in each case is not altogether clear (but notably, 1 King 22: 6 suggest some type of binary inquiry addressed to designated persons; a similar binary form is implied in the mantic queries ‘asked’ [verb: *sha’al*] by David of the Lord via the priestly Ephod in 1 Samuel 23: 2-4, 8-12), but the plain sense is that the question were posed to God through some medium on behalf of some life situation.

By contrast with these technical cases of divination, in Ezra 7: 10, the inquiry is made of the Torah itself. To be sure, there is no doubt that the ostensive purpose of such inquiry was to derive new rulings for a the new situation; but the significant absence here of terms like read, study, learn, or explicate underscores the particular nature of the present case. A weak construal of the phrase would suggest that an intense inquiry was made of the words of Torah so that new, divinely authorized explications might result; whereas a stronger construal would even suggest a divinatory orientation, whereby the reader-inquirer believed that the exegesis was divinely given and a teaching from the arcane depths of Torah. Either way, we stand before a new significantly new cultural moment: for hereby the content of revelation is the source for further revelation or learning, and the God of Torah continues to teach through the written Torah. If all this is not yet an explicit indication of some pneumatic revelation of Torah mysteries, it is surely some sense that pious Torah study would be complemented by divine inspiration of true understanding. But such a bold possibility cannot be excluded in some cases. For in Psalm 119, alongside such ‘exoteric’ appeals to God to “teach me (*horeni*)” or “cause me to understand (*havineni*)” the words and path of Torah (cf. v. 32), there is the remarkable request that the Lord “open my eyes (*gal eynai*) that I may perceive wonders *nifla’ot* from (the words of) your Torah” (v. 18). Is this language also a reuse of mantic-visionary terms? Merely recall the depiction of the soothsayer Balaam, who, when the “spirit of God” was upon him, called out and said, “This is the oracle of one who hears the words of El, who perceives the visions of Shaddai, who falls (in trance?) *galuy einayim* (his eyes opened)” (Numbers 24: 3-4). Unless we are wholly mistaken, it would seem that Psalm 119: 18 suggests that for some people the Torah had become a meditative medium for the disclosure of mysteries. Be this as it may, certain members of the Dead Sea scroll fellowship took this verse in precisely this mantic sense!<sup>5</sup>

5 See the pneumatic reuses of Psalm 119: 18 in 1Q *Serah Ha-Yahad* xi.3 (cf. lines 5-6); and the allusion to it and Numbers 23: 3-4 in 1Q *Hodayot* vii.19 (cf. x.4-7).

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We may now turn from such arcana to the *spiritualization* of Torah learning and the new *spiritual relation* to Torah that results. This is the second part of our inquiry; and here again our biblical sources formulate or prefigure a striking dimension of religiosity.

To set the parameters, we shall begin with the contents of Psalm 1, an important Torah based composition which undoubtedly reflects the values of the final redactors. In this liturgical piece, highest felicity is accorded one who not only keeps apart from evil persons, sinners, and scoffers (a genuine piece of wisdom advice), but “whose delight (*heftzo*) is the Torah of YHWH, and who recites his Torah day and night” (v. 2). Such a person will be firmly rooted against the hardships of life, and all that he does “shall succeed (*yatzliah*)” (v. 3). In brief, there are practical benefits to Torah study and commitment – a providential reward for such involvement. Our text leaves the matter as such, without a specific application. But later tradents were more specific, and produced a striking inner-biblical revision of an earlier case of direct divine mediation. That initial situation involves Moses’s stirring exhortation to Joshua as future leader of the conquest. According to the formulation found in Deuteronomy 31:6-7, the aged leader addresses his successor before the national assembly, and tells him to “be strong and courageous”, for he is soon to enter the land promised by the Lord to the ancestors to give to them, and he will enact the inheritance thereof. Moreover, God himself “will go before you and be with you”, neither failing him or abandoning him – hence, he repeats: “be not afraid or terrified”. The repeated exhortation that frames the reference to divine protection in battle is a clear inducement to military courage in the face of a fearsome enterprise. The leader is told to go forward, knowing that God will aid his activity. Resoluteness is the demand of the hour, nothing more. By contrast, when this tradition is re-cited (in the same terms) at the beginning of the book of Joshua, it is placed in God’s mouth, who first of all tells Joshua that he will be with him, and neither fail or abandon him; hence Joshua should be strong and courageous, because he will cause the people to inherit the land which God swore to the ancestors (vv. 4-6); and this exhortation to be courageous and not be afraid is repeated for good emphasis one more time (v. 9). But on closer examination, these military exhortations form a bracket within which another exhortation occurs. In vv. 7-8 Joshua is now told to be strong and mighty (the same terms) “to observe and do all the Torah which Moses my servant commanded you; do not depart from it, to the right or left, that you be succeed in all that you do: let the Torah not depart from your mouth, but recite it day and night, that you observe and do all that is written in it, for then you will succeed in all your ways and be successful (*tatzliah*)”. Surely it is evident here that notions of *nomos* have influenced our final version – specifically, that benefits of Torah study (found in

Psalm 1: 2-3), and the exhortation to hew to its observance, and not veering right or left (as emphasized in Deuteronomy 17: 11). Granted, this is not an outright spiritualization of Torah, but it is a spiritualizing revision of military terms for all that, and the religious revision is more than evident. a shift in Scripture centered religiosity must be presupposed.

Surely such a shift must have meant a more spiritual valuation of Torah itself and its benefits. Famously, such a dimension and its benefits is celebrated in Psalm 19, where, for example, the psalmist exults and expresses the following equations: 'The Torah of YHWH is pure: it restores the soul; the Testimony (*edut*) of YHWH is trustworthy: it makes wise the foolish; the Statutes (*pequdei*) of YHWH are upright: they rejoice the heart; (and) the Commandment (*mitvah*) of YHWH is pure: it enlightens the eyes" (vv. 4-5). Such a series of synonyms for Torah (*edut*, *pequdim*, *mitzvah*) recur in the grand celebration of Torah and its learning found in Psalm 119, along with a rich catalogue of virtues and benefits. Such encomiums are of course greatly to be appraised for the window they open to an emergent Torah-based spirituality in ancient Israel. But it is even possible to perceive this beyond such topical remarks. Indeed, a close comparison of spiritual attitudes directed to God in various Psalms and elsewhere in Scripture are applied or addressed to the Torah in Psalm 119. This is not of course to imply that Torah piety became a substitute for God-centered piety, or that the Torah mediated divine benefits and displaced spiritual attitudes directed to God alone. It is rather to disclose how language expressive of the most profound God-oriented piety was transferred to the Torah, where it came to serve as a focus and locus of religious attachment. To make the point as succinctly and as strongly as possible, I shall compare a verse expressing a religiously charged verb related to God with one where the referent is Torah (based on a passage from Psalm 119). One could certainly multiple examples on both sides; but the following list makes the point in nuce.

1. "You shall love (*ve-ahavta*) YHWH, your God" (Deuteronomy 6: 4)  
"How greatly do I love (*ahavti*) your Torah" (Psalm 119: 87)
2. "Loving YHWH, your God ...and cleaving (*le-davqah*) to him" (Deuteronomy 11: 22)  
"O YHWH, I have cleaved (*davaqti*) to your testimonies" (Psalm 119: 13)
3. "I have set (*shivviti*) YHW before me, always" (Psalm 16: 8)  
"I have chosen a path of faith (*emunah*), and set your statues (before me) (Psalm 119: 30)
4. "O Israel, trust (*betah*) in YHWH" (Psalm 115: 9)  
"I have trusted (*batahti*) in your words" (Psalm 119: 42)
5. "Rise up (*se'i*) ... your hands to him (God)" (Lamentations 2: 19)  
"I shall raise (*esa*) my hands to your commandments" (Psalm 119: 48)

6. "And they trusted (*va-ya'aminu*) in YHWH" (Exodus 14: 31)

"I have trusted (*ha'emanti*) in your commandments" (Psalm 119: 66)

We should not minimize the seismic implications of the expressions found in Psalm 119. They reveal a spiritual attitude in which the Torah and the commandments are the object of spiritual veneration, love, and trust; this is more than a piety of study and observance, and remarkably discloses a dimension of relationship to the commandments and Torah which is pious and religious in its own right. With the transformation of Torah study and its teachings, we are close to the heartbeat of the birth of Judaism. Psalm 119 is thus an axial document in the history of the religion of Israel – one which sets the course for millennia of Jewish spirituality, from late antiquity on. It is at once an ancient formation and preformation of subsequent types.

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By way of conclusion, I wish to point to one example from classical Jewish sources which integrates the great transformative powers of Torah study together with a sense of (and belief in), its role as a substitute for other rituals. To my mind, it too is of axial and paradigmatic significance for understanding Jewish spirituality and hermeneutics. I shall provide examples occurring in one Talmudic source – which not only mark this change, but provide the paradigm formulation for its ongoing cultural impact.

The source is b. Menahot 110a. The pertinent portion begins with an interpretation of Malachi 1: 11: "Everywhere incense is burnt to My Name". In context, the prophet celebrates the world-wide worship of the Lord among the nations (as contrasted to Israelite desecrations); but the rabbis interpret otherwise. Referring to the phrase "everywhere", R. Samuel bar Nahman provides an unexpected twist in the name of R. Yohanan. It is now averred that the passage refers to "students of the wise who are everywhere engaged in Torah study", and that God is now said (through this reinterpreted passage) to assert that He "counts (this behavior) as if they (the scholars) actually offered incense to My Name". At first glance this has all the marks of a strong rhetorical flourish – a kind of pious exhortation transforming and enhancing Torah study into a kind of ritual offering, in all the places of study, throughout the diaspora. And this may indeed have been R. Yohanan's meaning, as a series of similar exhortations recorded in this section could suggest. This aside, R. Yohanan's brother-in-law, and celebrated study-partner, R. Simeon ben Lakish (Resh Lakish), turns attention in a different direction. He asked: "Why is it stated (in Leviticus 7:37): 'This is the Torah for the holocaust (-offering), the meal (-offering), and for the sin (-offering) and the guilt (-offering)'?" And his answer is given forthwith: "Everyone who studies the Torah is as if he offered up the holocaust-, meal-, sin-, and guilt-offerings". Now

it might seem that Resh Lakish is simply giving another version of R. Yohanan's teaching; but this would, I think, under-read the interpretation. For it would appear that Resh Lakish's exegesis turns on the phrase "This is the Torah for x"). In context, the word 'torah' here seems to be distributive, and refer to the various 'torah-instructions' – along the lines of priestly torahs noted earlier (and indeed vv. 37 f function as a summary colophon). By contrast, the force of Resh Lakish's remark would seem to read the phraseology in a new way, supporting the new powers of study: "This is the Torah' (and its study is equivalent to the performance) 'of holocaust- etc. offerings". That is, the sage hermeneutically transforms the syntax. The deictic "This is the Torah" is now said to serve *le-* ("for") the erstwhile offerings. Granted, the teaching is terse; and it was probably for that reason studied and explicated in the academy, as we may confirm from the juxtaposition of a teaching of Rava (a later sage in Babylonia) to this tradition, which indeed seems like a subsequent interpretation of it along the lines just proposed. Hereby, Rava says (and note that he does not quote a text but offers a dictum, suggesting that he is commenting on the previous remark – or at least that is how the Talmudic tradition understood it or chose to construe it): "Whoever studies Torah has no need of the holocaust- (or sin-) or meal- or guilt-offering"). Thus according to Rava, presumably explicating Resh Lakish, we told of the transformative powers of Torah study, a new and effective act of devotion and offering in the absence of the Temple. Now, study of the passages dealing with the offerings serve as the functional substitute of the actual performance. The rhetorical 'as if' is reciprocally transformed into a marker of true equivalence. To reinforce this point, and perhaps to buttress it, the Talmudic tradition adduces in conclusion the teaching of R. Yitzhak, who came to the same conclusion by a different textual route. For him, other Scriptural phraseology made the point just as well (and perhaps even better). He asks: "Why is it written (in Leviticus 6: 2, 7, 18; and 7:1): 'This is the torah of x' (i.e., *torat ha-olah/ha-minhah*, etc.)? – To teach you that whoever engages in the study of the torah dealing with the *olah* (holocaust), etc., is as if he offered the *olah* (in fact; etc.)".

Herewith we come to a remarkable cultural moment. Torah is not only the focus of devoted inquiry and interpretation, but more: the Torah that one studies (in the rabbinic manner) as an object of veneration and spiritual trust may now effect benefits otherwise unavailable. In the present instance, study of the sacrifices provides the ritual equivalent of their performance. Study is thus a transformed priestly rite, and sacrificial satisfactions may be achieved through rabbinic hermeneutics alone. Here then is one of the secrets of Jewish spiritual survival, and, I would add, one of the most compelling inner-Jewish responses to the claims of Christianity and its contentions regarding atonement and forgiveness through sacrificial substitution.

## JONATHAN GARB

# Moshe Idel's Contribution to the Study of Religion

### **Abstract:**

The article discusses the contribution of Moshe Idel's vast research to the field of religious studies. The terms which best capture his overall approach are "plurality" and "complexity". As a result, Idel rejects essentialist definitions of "Judaism", or any other religious tradition. The ensuing question is: to what extent does his approach allow for the characterization of Judaism as a singular phenomenon which can be differentiated from other religions? The answer seems to lie in Idel's definition of the "connectivity" between the human and the divine as a relationship which "underlies the basic notion of religion as such". Opposing Rudolph Otto's description of the holy as remote, Idel explains holiness in terms of closeness and connection. This reading of religion is supported by that of sociologist Danièle Hervieu-Léger, who describes religious practice as constructing a "chain of memory" - a term which echoes with Idel's analysis of Jewish ritual as the construction of "enchanted chains" of connectivity. Hervieu-Léger's study points towards the possibility of regarding Judaism, as a family-centered tradition, as paradigmatic for traditional religion. Indeed, in recent studies, Idel describes the construction of memory through ritual practice as the most important means of shaping identity for all forms of traditional Judaism. The model of "chains of memory" can be located in classical Jewish texts, such as a much-quoted passage by Nahmanidies - the extremely important thirteenth-century Kabbalist and legal authority. This text describes Jewish rituals as maintaining continuity across generations. We see then that the notion of connectivity moves us closer to the concerns found in central Jewish texts, rather than imposing modern agenda on them. It can also be used to determine to what extent a given idea or practice is connected to the chain of connectivity constructed by a given tradition or is rather tangential to it. In this sense, it is a corrective to the danger of "dispersion" that is implicit in Idel's focus on plurality and complexity.

## Idel and Religious Studies: an Overview

Moshe Idel's vast oeuvre could have been described solely in terms of publication of a vast number of Kabbalistic and proto-Kabbalistic texts, many of which were previously extant only in manuscript form. These texts, often anonymous and mysterious in origin, were then dated, attributed to authors or at least to schools of thought, often translated from Hebrew and most importantly, analyzed in depth and in relation to other texts from diverse periods over the two millennia of Jewish mystical writing.

This project alone would have already provided an extremely distinguished contribution, however one may safely say that although Idel explicitly regards this work as the indispensable foundation of this research,<sup>1</sup> it is not his main concern. Rather, the trajectory of Idel's scholarly development can be described as an ongoing attempt to constantly rewrite the history of Kabbalah.<sup>2</sup>

This re-writing of the history (as well as pre-history) of Kabbalah is in turn part of a wider re-reading of the very nature and trajectories of Jewish religiosity.<sup>3</sup> This contribution is worthy of a study in itself, which I hope to essay elsewhere, but here I wish to focus on the manner in which Idel's readings of Kabbalah alongside with other varied forms of Jewish religiosity offer powerful enhancements of the study of religion as a discipline.<sup>4</sup>

In his ground-breaking *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (1988), which is surely his most quoted work,<sup>5</sup> Idel situated the phenomenological investigation of Kabbalah as a major alternative to the hitherto dominant historical-philological

- 1 I shall mention among the frequent critiques that he levies at generalized statements lacking firm textual foundation. However, despite occasional assertions to the contrary in reviews, polemics are subsidiary to Idel's main project and can be regarded as attempts to steer the course of scholarship away from moves which distance its readers from the texts themselves.
- 2 One simile that Idel sometimes employs for this process is that of an ever-shifting puzzle, whose boundaries and components change as one seemingly fills it in. Compare to the term "dynamic net" in *Enchanted Chains: Techniques and Rituals in Jewish Mysticism* (Los Angeles, 2005), p. 32.
- 3 Both of these moves can be also described as forms of what Jonathan Z. Smith has termed "redescription", in turn as "rectification" of scholarly categories (In his *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago, 2004), pp. 29, 57). Following on Idel's terms "new perspectives," one could also describe this process as "revisioning", as in James Hillman, *Revisioning Psychology* (New York, 1975).
- 4 To date the potential of Idel's work for theorizing religion has been appreciated mainly by Philip Wexler, as in his *Holy Sparks: Social Theory, Education and Religion* (New York, 1996), as well as of course playing an important role in the tragically curtailed dialogue between Idel and the late Ion Couliano (see e.g. *Out of this World* (Boston and London, 1991, pp. 165, 181, 184).
- 5 This book crystallized numerous insights and studies that were contained in numerous articles published earlier, as well as Idel's trilogy on Abraham Abulafia's ecstatic Kabbalah, which was published roughly at the same time. However, for the purposes of the present article, I shall focus on the works published in non-Hebrew languages in the last two decades, which are more obviously part of Idel's international impact. On the development of Idel's thought, see Jonathan Garb, *Manifestations of Power In Jewish Mysticism From Rabbinic Literature to Safedian Kabbalah* (Jerusalem, 2004), p. 60-61 (Hebrew). For Idel's own history of Kabbalah scholarship, which does not include the important developments of the last decade, see his "Academic Studies of Kabbalah in Israel 1923-1998: a Short Survey," *Studia Judaica* 8 (1999), pp. 91-114.

school of Gershom Scholem and several of his disciples. This book also contains a programmatic call for a far more massive incorporation of comparative religion, psychology, and “other branches of humanistic studies”<sup>6</sup> Particularly, Idel recommended a more intensive perusal of studies of other mystical systems, as well as the theory of mysticism as such, as part of an attempt to establish the independence of Kabbalah as a research domain, which can be set apart to some degree from the field of “Jewish Thought” (the name of Idel’s home department), and from Jewish studies in a more general sense.

As a result of these two moves and their subsequent development, Idel can be regarded as one of the major proponents of the phenomenological study of religion, (alongside with scholars such as Lawrence Sullivan, Louis Dupré and Thomas Ryba). In addition, he can be seen as one of an emerging group of contemporary scholars who have established the study of mysticism as a separate, vibrant field within Religious Studies (other notable members of this group, to mention but a few, are J. B. Hollenback, Robert Forman, Steven Katz, William Parsons, Michael Sells). As such, he is joined within Jewish studies by Elliot R. Wolfson, who has also offered extensive phenomenological comparisons between Jewish mysticism and other mystical systems of East and West.<sup>7</sup> Idel’s explicit theoretical concerns are reflected in a very large number of general methodological statements throughout his treatment of specific issues, many of which shall be adduced in the course of this article.

Idel’s theoretical approach differentiates his work somewhat from the equally impressive oeuvre of Yehuda Liebes - his fellow Jerusalemite and ally in the critique of numerous components of the Scholemian paradigm. The latter’s profound insights are markedly present in Idel’s own writing.<sup>8</sup> Though Liebes shares (and in some cases presaged<sup>9</sup>) many of Idel’s specific conclusions, he avoids theoretical generalizations and prefers to focus on incisive close textual readings. Furthermore, he regards his field as “*Mystical Judaism*”<sup>10</sup> as opposed to

6 Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah – New Perspectives* (New Haven and London, 1988), pp. 22-25. These “other branches” presumably include sociology, anthropology, and literary theory, which play an important role in Idel’s later works. Compare to *Messianic Mystics* (New Haven and London, 1998), pp. 331, n. 44, 413, n. 8.

7 As is evident in his recent works: *Language, Eros, Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination* (New York, 2005) and *Venturing Beyond: Law and Morality in Kabbalistic Mysticism* (Oxford, 2006).

8 Liebes’ programmatic “New Directions in the Study of the Kabbalah,” *Pe’amim* 50 (1992), pp. 150-170 (Hebrew) was published shortly after Idel’s *New Perspectives*, and partly defending it from its critics, whilst his earlier work on Jewish myth presaged both the “reconstruction” offered in Idel’s magnum opus, as well exemplifying the comparative direction suggested there (although Liebes usually restricts his rich comparisons to the adjacent classical, European and Islamic cultures, and avoids the comparisons with Far Eastern and Shamanic phenomena (on the latter see below) found throughout *New Perspectives* as well as in Idel’s more recent writing, as in *Messianic Mystics*, pp. 290-291; *Kabbalah and Eros* (New Haven and London, 2005), p. 220. I hope to address Liebes’ contribution to the study of Jewish religiosity elsewhere.

9 See Idel’s own statements in *Messianic Mystics*, pp. X, 293.

10 See Yehuda Liebes, “Some Thoughts about the Religious Significance of Kabbalah Research”, in *The Path of the Spirit: The Eliezer Schweid Jubilee Volume*, ed. Y. Amir I (Jerusalem, 2005), pp. 197-208, and especially pp. 203-204.

the phrase "Jewish Mysticism" often employed by Idel, and not coincidentally so.<sup>11</sup> Thus, Liebes explicitly situates Kabbalah more strongly within the context of the Jewish religion and thus within the academic field of Jewish studies as well as the traditional world of Torah study.

Finally, while Liebes investigates a staggering range of texts, personalities, and periods, he tends to relate his findings to a central canon, comprised of the "great books" of Jewish mysticism, such as Sefer Yesira, the Zohar and the Lurianic corpus, as well as uncovering recurring themes such as creativity and messianism.<sup>12</sup> This dual choice reinforces a sense of "Jewish continuity" within the tradition, while giving it a sense of cohesion, thus avoiding the gravitation of parts of Kabbalah away from the central texts, and potentially away from the Jewish world. In other words, Liebes exploits the phenomenon of intertextuality to construct a tighter sense of a tradition, in which diverse writers participate in a virtual discussion over the centuries. As we shall soon see, the alternative posed by the approach of Liebes, precisely in the light of his belonging to the same "school" as Idel, is extremely useful for critiquing and evaluating the implications of the latter's method.

At the same time, it is Idel's very openness to a variety of theoretical tools which leads him to eschew the selective application of a single theoretical approach - a choice rather common in today's over-specialized academic world, which is characterized at times by intense loyalty to a single framework. This pluralistic stance was recently expressed quite strongly in the introduction to Idel's monograph *Ascensions on High* (2005), which presents the limitations of no less than eight such approaches, including historical, psychological, comparative, and phenomenological methods.<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, plurality can be said to be Idel's meta-method, as it is reflected in his "polychromatic" approach to the study of Messianism,<sup>14</sup> "panoramic" approach to the history of later Kabbalah,<sup>15</sup> and critique of the "binary" approach to early Kabbalah.<sup>16</sup> To recur to our opening remarks, fixation on a single tool or method,

11 See also Boaz Huss, "The mystification of Kabbalah and the myth of Jewish Mysticism", *Pe'amim* 110 (1997), pp. 9-30 (Hebrew), for a nominalistic critique of the very use of the term "Mysticism" for the study of Kabbalah.

12 As stated explicitly in Liebes' public lecture "Spirituality and Spirit", at the Van Leer Institute in Jerusalem, May 2006 (forthcoming in a collection on Jewish Spirituality, for now online in his website: <http://pluto.huji.ac.il/~liebes/zohar/ruhaniut.doc> (Hebrew)).

13 Compare to earlier formulations in *Messianic Mystics*, pp. 257, 329, n. 18.

14 Moshe Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, pp. 17, 272-273. Compare to the term "polymorphous" in E. R. Wolfson, *Along the Path: Essays in Kabbalistic Hermeneutics, Myth and Symbolism* (Albany, 1995), p. 69.

15 See idem *ibid*, pp. 23, 242-244, 262; idem, *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic* (Albany, 1995), pp. 9-15; *Ascensions on High In Jewish Mysticism: Pillars, Lines, Ladders* (Budapest and New York, 2005), p. 153.

16 Moshe Idel, "On Binary 'Beginnings in Kabbalah Scholarship", in *Historicization – Historisierung*, ed. G. W. Most (Göttingen, 2001), pp. 313-337.

as well as construction of grand schemes, are seen by Idel as a move away from the ever-enriching possibilities latent in the texts themselves.<sup>17</sup>

Whilst advocating plurality, Idel certainly isolates recurring patterns in Kabbalistic practice. Thus, he is especially famous for applying the methodological tool of construction of models, common in the social sciences.<sup>18</sup> Most notably in his works on Hasidism, Messianism, Eros, he uses several such models, defined, significantly for the present discussion, as “a cluster of concepts that constitute a relatively consistent religious structure,”<sup>19</sup> to describe long-term tendencies in the history of Kabbalah, and thus to relate texts from different historical periods and geographical locales. By doing so, he challenges more atomistic approaches which threaten to reduce the history of Kabbalah to a set of random and localized occurrences.<sup>20</sup>

However, when considering the place of this method within Idel’s overall methodology, it is best to recall that according to Idel’s own strictures, it can be at best one tool amongst many. Therefore, models are means of describing connections but, at the same time, are in the service of plurality as they help with uncovering several discrete structures, often within the same school, corpus, or even text.<sup>21</sup>

## Complexity

“Complexity” is perhaps the most frequently recurring term in Idel’s writing during the last decade.<sup>22</sup> One should see this rhetorical emphasis as an intensification of Idel’s ongoing engagement with ‘generalist’ approaches to religion.<sup>23</sup> Idel’s rejection of essentialist approaches tallies well with his proclivity for a “technical constructivism” in the famous ongoing debate as to the nature of mysticism: essentialist or culturally constructed?<sup>24</sup> Thus, the innovative nature of Idel’s general approach to religion is best

17 See e.g. *Messianic Mystics*, pp. 180, 251-254, 285, 329, n. 14, 390, n. 96, 401, n.3; *Kabbalah and Eros*, pp. 15, 99, 149, 280, n. 140.

18 See especially the programmatic discussion in Idel, *Hasidism*, pp. 45-102. For a treatment of the application of this tool in the study of Kabbalah, see Garb, *Manifestations of Power*, pp. 60-64.

19 Idel, op. cit. p. 49. See also *Messianic Mystics*, p. 17, for the broader, yet telling, terms “unified categories”, “unified diachronic conceptual schemes”, and see p. 335, n.77. for a comparison to the term “deep structures”, as well as *Ascensions On High*, p. 27 on “consonant” structures.

20 See e.g. *Ascensions on High*, p. 1, as well as his earlier critique of the related fallacy of “proximism” in *Hasidism*, pp. 6-9.

21 See *Kabbalah and Eros*, pp. 13, 222.

22 I believe that Idel’s rhetoric of complexity first became obvious in his *Hasidism*. It is interesting to speculate as to what extent Idel here betrays the influence of the current Zeitgeist, a manifested in the so-called “Science of Complexity”.

23 See especially *Enchanted Chains*, p. 65. Idel does not address Maurice Gauchet’s work, yet one presumes would have a similar reservation vis-à-vis his grand historical schemata.

24 However see the rather Eliadian early formulation on this topic in *Kabbalah – New Perspectives*, p. 37.

appreciated against the background of the profound influence of much more universal narratives in religious studies, especially those of Mircea Eliade, rather than within the more narrow framework of Jewish studies.

As Jonathan Z. Smith has shown in his incisive analysis of the meta-structure in Mircea Eliade's *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, in the grand scheme created by the latter forms of complexity and the processes of variation and combination that ensue from complexity are bracketed through the stronger force of reversion to type, which maintains the primacy of the archetypal structure.<sup>25</sup> Idel's varied response to Eliade's reading of Judaism is telling, as it subsumes his ongoing critique of Scholem within a broader response to the moves of the Romanian scholar, a key point which I shall reinforce later in this section. This background is explicitly presented in the following quote from Idel:

Eliade generally operates with strong phenomenologies, which are intended to cover extensive religious phenomena. In order to present his strong categories, he conceives of his literary corpora as homogenous writings. This is also true of Scholem's juxtaposition of rabbinism and Kabbalah ... Both scholars postulated the existence of puristic types of literature ... In place of these oversimplified phenomenologies the academic approach to rich and complicated types of literature posits more complex conceptualizations ...

The combination of more than one model thus allows for a greater comprehension of the complexity of experiences and praxes of medieval and early modern Jewish mystics.<sup>26</sup>

In light of Idel's ever-increasing proclivity for multivocality and complexity,<sup>27</sup> one must ask if he ultimately allows for overall structures which characterize Judaism as a singular phenomenon and differentiate it from other religions? In other words, if what we find is in fact a multiplicity of traditions, texts, and practices, which can be only linked by complex combinatory strategies and organized ad hoc, as it were, round specific items of investigation, perhaps there is no Judaism as such? Does he not write: "the complexity of cosmopolitan religions is so great that

25 Smith, *Relating Religion*, pp. 89-94.

26 P. 159 in Moshe Idel, "Some Concepts of Time and History in Kabbalah", in *Jewish History and Jewish Memory: Essays in Honor of Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi*, eds. E. Carlebach, J. Efron, D. Myers (Hannover and London, 1998), pp. 153-188, and compare to *Ascensions on High*, pp. 216 ff. For Eliade's influence on Gershom Scholem, see S. Wasserstrom, *Religion After Religion: Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade and Henry Corbin at Eranos* (Princeton, 1999), esp. pp. 60, 163-164, as well as Idel, opt cit. p. 225; *Enchanted Chains*, p. 11. For Scholem's limited influence on Eliade, see *ibid*, p. 6, as well as his afterword to the Hebrew edition (Jerusalem, 2000) of Eliade's *The Myth of Eternal Return*, p. 146. In other words, while Wasserstrom (opt cit.) generally describes Scholem and Eliade as partaking in a shared development of ideas, or "conversation" (see p. 166, 248) at the Eranos meetings (see e.g. p. 97), in Idel's opinion, the direction of influence is clearly from Eliade's grand scheme to Scholem's more specific views on Judaism.

27 On complexity as a clue for understanding the theme of Eros in Kabbalah, see Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah and Eros*, p. 5, and see there on Judaism as a complex and diversified culture, as well as the reiteration on p. 12. See also p. 100 on exploring complexities as the main task of the critical scholar, as well as the earlier statements in *Messianic Mystics*, p. 262, 265.

I wonder to what extent general terms like Judaism, Christianity and Hinduism, used to denote religions that spread to so many regions and interacted with so many cultures, are viable. I wonder if it would not be better to parcel them into smaller segments, like geographical regions, historical periods or specific trends".<sup>28</sup> Could it not then be claimed that any religious phenomena, whether inside or outside the seeming boundaries of Jewish life, could be found to be a candidate for forming such a local interrelationship. These questions are only reinforced by a recent meta-theoretical article of Idel's, which moves up in levels of analysis from "models" to "forms of order" (responding here to Eric Voegelin's concepts of order). Here, Idel attacks generic terms such as "Jewish", "Arabic", or "Christian", and asks: "What, one may ask, is precisely Jewish in a Hebrew-written text on astrology that derives its material from a variety of Hindu and Arabic Sources"?.<sup>29</sup>

In the specific context of Jewish mysticism, could not the multiple "models" described by Idel be re-defined to include similar mystical phenomena from other cultures? One such example would be Idel's comparison of the "Mystical-magical" model which he places at the heart of Hasidism, to Shamanic phenomena.<sup>30</sup> Another would be Idel's numerous studies on the close interrelationship between Jewish and Christian Kabbalah, especially during the Renaissance.<sup>31</sup> Would not Liebes then be correct in arguing that the very term "Jewish mysticism" threatens to disjoin Kabbalistic phenomena from their anchoring in Jewish culture? Though Idel eschews grand comparative schemes,<sup>32</sup> and in general is cautious with regard to comparative moves,<sup>33</sup> does his method not enable a far more profound form of comparativism? If, as Smith puts it, every theoretical position entails consequences, so that it is a question of choosing "what set of costs one is willing to bear",<sup>34</sup> are these not then the costs of consequences of Idel's approach for the study of Judaism, and by implication, of any given religion?<sup>35</sup>

28 *Ascensions on High*, p. 3 (compare to the critique of the notion of "Judaism" in the singular, in p. 237, n. 67, and also to *Kabbalah and Eros*, p. 14). Though in the former book (pp. 229-231) Idel rejects the option of assuming that cohesion within a religion is entirely artificial, the quote cited above veers in that direction.

29 Moshe Idel, "On Some Forms of Order in Kabbalah", *Daat* 50-52 (2003), pp. XXXIII-XXXIV.

30 Idel, *Hasidism*, pp. 214, 218, 225; *Ascensions on High*, pp. 148-150, 153-154, 159, 164, n. 40, 208.

31 See e.g. *Messianic Mystics*, pp. 142-144; *Absorbing Perfections: Kabbalah and Interpretation* (New Haven and London, 2002), pp. 464-465; *Enchanted Chains*, pp. 191-196; "Jewish Mystical Thought in The Florence of Lorenzo Il Magnifico," in *La Cultura Ebraica All'Epoca Di Lorenzo Il Magnifico* (Firenze, 1998), pp. 17-42. See however Idel's cautions against conflation of Christian and Jewish Kabbalah in his earlier *Kabbalah – New Perspectives*, pp. 262-263. Compare also to idem, "Kabbalah and Hermeticism in Dame Frances A. Yates' Renaissance", in *Esoterisme, Gnoses & Imaginaire Symbolique: Melanges offerts a Antoine Faivre*, eds. R. Caron, J. Godwin, W.J. Hanegraaf, J-L. Vieillard-Baron, (Louvain, 2001), pp. 71-90.

32 See *Messianic Mystics*, p. 283, as well as below,

33 See e.g. *Messianic Mystics*, pp. 290-292, *Kabbalah and Eros*, pp. 237-238,

34 *Relating Religion*, p. 99.

35 Compare to Idel's own self-critique in *Kabbalah and Eros*, p. 222.

## Connectivity

The kingdom of the [divine] world of emanation has descended entirely to the world of creation, and there is no greater connection [keshet] than this (Prayer book of the Ari, introduction to the silent prayer).

In this second part, I would like to answer these questions to some extent by proposing one meta-theme, which seems to point towards Idel's ultimately reading Judaism as a discretely identifiable religion. As such, it may provide a focal point which can balance his emphasis on multiplicity.<sup>36</sup>

One of Idel's major critiques of Scholem's meta-narrative on Kabbalah was the latter's claim that Jewish mysticism assumed a gap between the divine and the human. This move expressed itself both in Idel's rebuttal of Scholem's famous denial of the possibility of Union Mystica in kabbalistic literature, as well as his deconstruction of Scholem's argument as to the centrality of symbolism in Kabbalah, which follows from the assumption of an epistemological divide that can be bridged only by symbols.<sup>37</sup>

Most explicitly in his recent *Enchanted Chains* (2005), which is in many ways a summary of his existing research, Idel has opposed this set of assumptions with the description of Jewish mysticism as a set of practices<sup>38</sup> designed to enhance a series of "ontic continua", or "connecting metaphysical continua", which are in themselves embedded in the deep structures constructed by the kabbalistic ontology. Here, Idel already comes close to providing a cohesive and centralizing approach to Judaism as a whole when he refers to the emphasis on technique and performance as "the deep structure of classical Judaism".<sup>39</sup> According to Idel, this overall framework holds

36 See also Moshe Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, p. 24, for the need to focus on the most "recurring and influential themes", rather than on the rarer transgressive elements, as contemporary scholars often do (compare to *Messianic Mystics*, p. 277). In general, Idel's rhetoric betrays a certain ambivalence surrounding this topic: In *Kabbalah and Eros*, p. 240, he immediately balances a speculation as to "the importance of eroticism in the context of the entire structure of Judaism" with the more qualified "some forms of Judaism may be described as a culture of Eros." As we shall see, once the theme of Eros is reinscribed within the wider trope of connection, the first formulation would seem to prevail.

37 See respectively, *Kabbalah – New Perspectives*, pp. 59-73, 200-219, as well as *Enchanted Chains*, pp. 21-24,

38 As Idel writes, "kabbalistic literature resembles halakhic literature" as its main purpose is to guide "as precisely as possible in the performance of ritual", rather than describing subjective experiences (*Kabbalah and Eros*, p. 242, and compare to pp. 25, 213-214). This meta-description of Kabbalah, and indeed Jewish religiosity in general in terms of practice, rather than theology, is another hallmark of Idel's writing, and explains his reluctance to write the history of Kabbalah in the "history of ideas" mode (which he has in fact characterized as "simplistic" (Moshe Idel, "Unio Mystica: 'Hegelian' Phenomenologies of Jewish Mysticism," in *Doors of Understanding: Conversations in Global Spirituality in Honor of Ewert Cousins*, ed. S. Chase (Quincy (IL), 1997), p. 326). See also *Enchanted Chains*, pp. 24-25, 32-41, 215-220; Moshe Idel, "On the Theologization of Kabbalah in Modern Scholarship," in *Religious Apologetics – Philosophical Argumentation*, eds. Y. Schwartz and V. Krech (Tuebingen, 2004), pp. 123-174. For Idel's debate with Eliade (and the latter's influence on Scholem) on the role of ritual in Judaism see his "Some Concepts of Time"; "Memento Dei", p. 169.

39 *Enchanted Chains*, p. 34, and compare to p. 224-227.

true for the techniques of Ecstatic Kabbalah, which are oriented towards facilitating individual experience,<sup>40</sup> as well as for the theurgical rituals of theosophical Kabbalah and the magical practices found in other kabalistic texts (these being the three main components of kabalistic writing a la Idel).

However, more explicitly here than elsewhere, Idel's critique of Scholem is again part of a much wider debate with the classical approaches to religion which shaped the thought of the Jerusalemite scholar. In his introduction, Idel divides "the current generation of generalist scholars of religion" in two major schools of thought: The first group is that of the "Hegelians" who, later on, regards more abstract religious developments as more "spiritual" and advanced. These scholars, including Edward Caird, R. C. Zaehner, and to some extent Eric Voegelin, are "concerned with the content of abstract systems" and thus with theology.

The second group is that of the "archaists", most notably Joseph Campbell, Mircea Eliade, and C. G. Jung. The latter see more archaic forms of religion as "genuine", and thus stress myth, symbol, ritual and other "basic" forms of religion, which are often collective in nature. According to Idel, the value-laden assumptions of both schools fail to regard Judaism in its own terms and, of course, do not accept the possibility of this religion being in any way paradigmatic for the study of religion as such – for it is either too belated or too early. Idel then proceeds to place the Scholemian positions mentioned above within a broader context, in which the theoretical assumptions of Scholem may be described as a synthesis of Hegelian and archaist assumptions.

Idel's alternate scheme posits the "connectivity" between the human and the divine not merely as an imaginaire permeating kabalistic literature but rather as a "relationship that also underlies the basic notion of religion as such," whilst characteristically stressing that he regards this principle as "more comprehensive, though not universal."<sup>41</sup> True to his proclivity for complexity, Idel proceeds to set forth a variety of such forms of "continua", found both within Jewish literature and its cultural surroundings, such as Neo-Aristotelian and Neo-Platonic writing. By doing so, he effectively critiques the more limited array of themes found in Arthur Lovejoy's classical *The Great Chain of Being*.<sup>42</sup>

I regard *Enchanted Chains* not merely as a summary of Idel's earlier writing, but also as denoting a shift into new domains, also apparent in other studies published at the same time. Predictably, "connective systems" also constitute a major theme in Idel's recent *Kabbalah and Eros* (2005).<sup>43</sup> Likewise, Idel's work on

40 See also *Messianic Mystics*, p. 247, 255-259, on connection as the goal of experience. See also "On Some Forms of Order", p. XXXVI on "more intense forms of connectiveness", rather than freedom, as the goal of experiences such as unio mystica.

41 *Enchanted Chains*, pp. 25 and 75 respectively.

42 See *ibid*, p. 53.

43 See especially p. 241 and see also p. 212 on "the correlative mode of religious thought", again a term with wider theoretical potential, and see p. 245 on the relationship between these two "main lines" of

ascent and descent along vertical chains branched off into discussions of cosmic pillars as modes of ascending connection in his *Ascensions on High* (2005). Finally, in a recent critique of Rudolph Otto's phenomenology of religion and especially of Judaism, Idel opposes the latter's understanding of his key concept of "the Holy" in terms of separation and distance to an alternative rendering of holiness as closeness and connection, often effected by ritual performance.<sup>44</sup>

I wish to posit that this "connective hypothesis" should be re-formulated as a theory of religion, rather than Judaism per se.<sup>45</sup> As such, it may be said to connect, as it were, to theoretical formulations of Phillip Almond<sup>46</sup> as well as more specific work done by Bernard McGinn<sup>47</sup> and David Blumenthal.<sup>48</sup> In the following section, I shall show how this "meta-model", conjoined with another of Idel's wider observations on Jewish religiosity, not only embellishes an important recent theory of religion, but can be said to be found in one of the most formative texts ever composed by a Jewish writer, who was both a leading mystic and a halakhist.

## Chains of Memory

In *La Religion pour Mémoire*, recently (2000) published in English as *Religion as a Chain of Memory*, the prominent sociologist of religion Danièle Hervieu-Léger offered a much-acclaimed reformulation of the social workings of religion, which has been supported by more recent studies.<sup>49</sup> Although the focus of this work is on the changes undergone by religion in the modern period, rather than the

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kabbalistic thought.

- 44 Moshe Idel, "Ganz Andere: On Rudolph Otto and Concepts of Holiness in Jewish Mysticism", *Daat* 57-59 (2006), pp. XV-XLIV.
- 45 See also *Enchanted Chains*, p. 123, 133-144, for the term "meso-cosmos" for mediating and connective mythical realms, which provides a powerful tool for the study of myth. Likewise, his discussion of the "luminous continuum" can help reinforce and further conceptualize recent discussions of the centrality of light imagery in mystical experience (see E. R. Wolfson, *Through a Speculum that Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton, 1994); J. B. Hollenback, *Mysticism: Experience, Response and Empowerment* (Philadelphia, 1996), pp. 56-74).
- 46 Phillip Almond, *Mystical Experience and Religious Doctrine* (Berlin, 1982), pp. 158-159; Compare also to the emphasis on the theme of "relation" in Thomas A. Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling: a Theory of Religion* (Cambridge (Mass.), 2006). Indeed the term "correlational", as a theoretical construct recurs in Idel's recent writing ("On the Theologization of Kabbalah", p. 171; idem, "Panim – on facial Re-Presentations in Jewish Thought: Some Correlational Instances", in *On Interpretation in the Arts*, ed. N. Yaari (Tel Aviv, 2000), pp. 21-56).
- 47 Bernard McGinn, *The Golden Chain* (Washington, 1972).
- 48 David Blumenthal, "Lovejoy's Great Chain of Being and the Jewish Tradition," reprinted in *Jacob's Ladder and the Tree of Life: Concepts of Hierarchy and the Great Chain of Being*, eds. M. Learth Kuntz, and P. Grimley (New York, 1987), pp. 179-190.
- 49 See e.g. Harvey Whitehouse, "Toward a Comparative Anthropology of religion," in *Ritual and Memory: Toward a Comparative Anthropology of Religion*, eds. Harvey Whitehouse and James Laidlaw (Walnut Creek (CA), 2004), pp. 187-203.

mostly pre-modern texts dealt with by Idel, its theoretical direction can be seen as convergent with that of our subject.

In general, Hervieu-Léger offers a working definition of religion, while – in a fashion reminiscent of Idel – stipulating that it is but one amongst several possibilities. Religion here is “an ideological, practical and symbolic system through which consciousness, both individual and collective, of belonging to a particular chain of belief is constituted, maintained, developed, and controlled”. Hervieu-Léger emphasizes that “it is not the continuity itself that matters but the fact of its being a visible expression of a lineage that the believer expressly lays claim to and which confers membership of a spiritual community that gathers past, present and future believers.”<sup>50</sup>

This approach is especially useful for the study of Judaism, despite the fact that Hervieu-Léger’s formulations, influenced by her background in the study of Christianity, are weighted towards belief rather than practice.<sup>51</sup> Despite this tendency, Hervieu-Léger is well aware of the possibility that Judaism, as a family-centered religion, can be seen in some way paradigmatic for traditional religion: “To experience the real meaning of being part of a continuing tradition, one can hardly do better than to refer to the book in which Josef Erlich describes ... the celebration of the Sabbath in a Polish shtetl.<sup>52</sup> Every gesture expressed, every moment passed by the Jewish family ... is invested with a sense of immemorial continuity in which it is supposed to find its place.”<sup>53</sup>

This “immemorial continuity” is, of course, heavily dependent on the ongoing maintenance of memory – “collective religious memory is subject to constantly recurring construction”. In this context, Hervieu-Léger foregrounds ritual as a constant “recalling to memory of the past”. Once again, “the cycle of Jewish feasts clearly provide a paradigm of the specific nature of religious ritual.”<sup>54</sup>

The salience of memory in Jewish practice was the topic of a rather lengthy recent (2002) article by Idel, where he describes the process of “memorizing” by creating “an envelope of reminders” that “remained the single most important form of shaping identity for all the forms of traditional Judaism.”<sup>55</sup> This uncharacteristically unqualified statement shows that Idel sees “memorizing” as a candidate for conceptualizing the core of Jewish identity. Indeed, this is a slightly uncommon example of a discussion of Idel’s reaching from the Bible, through Philo and Rabbinic literature, till Hasidism.

50 Danièle Hervieu-Léger, *Religion as a Chain of Memory*, trans. S. Lee (New Brunswick (N. J.), 2000), pp. 81-82.

51 See especially Hervieu-Léger, *ibid.*, pp. 101.

52 J. Erlich, *La Flamme du Shabbath* (Paris, 1978).

53 Hervieu-Léger, *opt cit.*, p. 86.

54 *Ibid.*, pp. 124-125. Here Hervieu-Léger builds on the earlier work of Maurice Halbwachs, *La Mémoire Collective* (Paris, 1950).

55 See p. 144 in Moshe Idel, “Memento Dei – Remarks on Remembering in Judaism,” *Il Senso della Memoria* (Roma, 2002), pp. 143-192.

While proposing the envelope of reminders as a generally "quintessential manner for understanding how traditional societies cope with dramatic changes affecting so much of their life without losing a sense of identity,"<sup>56</sup> Idel stresses the paramount importance of identity in minority cultures, such as Judaism. This study is clearly linked to Idel's connective hypothesis, as Idel stresses the role of acts of remembrance in enhancing connection with the divine.

The following text by the great 13<sup>th</sup> century Catalan halakhist and kabbalist, Nahmanidies perfectly illustrates the importance of "chains of memory" and the "envelope of reminders" within tradition, conjoined of course with a typically Jewish stress on ritual practice. It is not surprising that some of the Biblical examples that he adduces, such as the Tefilin and Mezuzot, are precisely those adduced by Idel:

And now I shall tell you a principle of the rationale of many of the commandments ... as God will not perform miracles and signs in every generation for the benefit of every wicked heretic, he commanded us to constantly create a memorial and a sign for that which our eyes have witnessed, and we shall transmit this matter to our sons, and their sons to their sons, and their sons to the last generation. And God was very strict on this matter ... and demanded that we write all that we have seen of the miracles and signs on our hands and between our eyes [the Tefillin] and place it further at the entrance of homes in Mezuzot, and recite it verbally morning and evening [the Shema prayer] ... and erect a Succah every year, and similarly many commandments to remember the Exodus from Egypt. And all this so that we shall possess in all generations signs that will not be forgotten and so that there shall be no opening for a heretic to deny faith in God, for one who purchases a Mezuzah for the price of one Zuz and places it on his entrance, with intention, has already admitted the creation of the world and the knowledge of God and his providence and prophecy and believes in all corners of the Torah, besides acknowledging the great grace of God towards those who perform his will and that he redeemed us from slavery to freedom and great honor to merit their ancestors ... and therefore they [the Sages] said (Avot 2, 1) be careful with a light commandment as with a severe one, for all are very dear and precious, for in every hour one acknowledges God through them, for the intention of all the commandments is to believe in God and thank him for creating us, and this is the intention of the creation itself, for there is no other purpose for the first creation, and the High One does not desire the lower realms except for Man to know and acknowledge his creator."<sup>57</sup>

56 Ibid, and see further, p. 146 for the centrality of memory in understanding the psychology of religion.

57 Nahmanidies, commentary on Exodus, 13, 16 (my translation). For discussions of various parts of this text within two recent magisterial treatments of this figure, see *Haviva Pedaya: Nahmanidies: Cyclical Time and Holy Text* (Tel Aviv, 2003), pp. 306, n. 47, 410, n. 36 (Hebrew); Moshe Halbertal, *By Way of Truth: Nahmanidies and the Creation of Tradition* (Jerusalem, 2006), pp. 281 (Hebrew).

Here, our kabbalist (whose theurgical doctrine is evident in the last sentence) seamlessly weaves together the metaphysical issues of the purpose of creation, providence etc. with what he explicitly describes as a general theory of Jewish practice: The creation of a continuous chain of memory (“our sons, and their sons to their sons and their sons) not merely between generations but in “every hour”, or as Idel would put it, in the “micro-cronos” as well.<sup>58</sup> The “signs”<sup>59</sup> or the semiotic network created by ritual re-create the sense of presence that was previously afforded by miracles. Thus, the commandments maintain the continuity of the contact with the divine.

I do not believe this move to be in any way an innovation of Nahmanidies. Rather, this thinker was very well attuned to what I would term “normal Judaism.” This theme can be found in the most basic of Jewish ritual performances: To bring but one example, the prayer connecting the *shem’a* and the *’amida* – the two poles of daily prayer, prefaces the following declaration to a description of the exodus and its miracles: “His words are alive and firm, trustworthy and pleasant for all eternity, for our ancestors and ourselves, for our children and generations, and all of the generations of the seed of Israel your servants. For the first ones and the last ones, this is a good and firm thing... truly you are God our Lord and the Lord of our ancestors, our king and the king of our ancestors.”

It is easily discernible that Nahmanidies is continuing the spirit of this liturgical text (one is also reminded of Hervieu-Léger’s spiritual community that gathers past, present and future believers). The resonance between our text and deep structures of Jewish tradition ensured that Nahmanidies’ formative text, itself found in an extremely widely read commentary on the Bible,<sup>60</sup> is frequently quoted in contemporary traditional discussions of Jewish ritual.<sup>61</sup>

Through the continuation of the Nahmanidean text we can discern yet a third theme closely related to connectivity: “And the intention of the raising of voice in prayers and the purpose of synagogues and the merit of public prayer is that people shall have a place to assemble and thank God for creating them ... and publish this.” In other words, collective production of sound plays an important role in strengthening the chain of memory. This classical text admirably illustrates yet another general direction of investigation recently developed by Idel:

In a study dedicated to “sonorous communities,”<sup>62</sup> Idel opposes the Scholemian (as well as Voegelinian) description of the divine voice creating a feeling of distance

58 See Idel, “Some Concepts of Time”.

59 For semiotic aspects of memorizing, see Idel, “Memento Dei,” especially p. 188.

60 On the necessity for every “true Jew” to master this commentary, see the important lately departed Mussar (ethics) teacher, R. Shlomo Wolbe, *’Ali Shur, I* (Beer Yaakov, 1978), p. 29.

61 See e.g. R. Moshe Shapira (a foremost Ultra-Orthodox thinker and the teacher of the French Jewish ultra-orthodox philosopher Benny Levy), *Afiqei Mayim: Be-’Inyanei Pesach* (Jerusalem, 2004), p. 58.

62 This article draws on earlier comments, which were not formulated and organized from a theoretical and sociological point of view, in *Hasidism*, e.g. pp. 165-168, 205, 216.

between God and man, with an entirely different understanding which emerges from numerous texts – Torah qua divine voice as a means of adhering to God. Idel explicitly relates these texts to his broader reading of the kabbalistic variant of the “great chain of being”. In other words, sound connects, as it were, the divine mouth with the human mouth, thus creating an “ontic link.”<sup>63</sup> These observations echo and resonate, so to speak, in *Enchanted Chains*, where Idel defines vocal techniques as “linguistic-ontic cords.”<sup>64</sup>

In the same year (2002) Idel published an extremely broad study of Jewish hermeneutics, which in turn crystallizes numerous studies he devoted to language in Kabbalah. Here Idel located “significant instances of linguocentric forms of mysticism” in different forms of Kabbalah.<sup>65</sup> Idel’s following statement, which itself constitutes an important contribution to religious studies, is that “This form of spirituality should be recognized as a category in itself”. It is highly significant that Idel stresses here that “language and text-oriented experiences have a prominently connective social role,”<sup>66</sup> thus giving a more sociological focus to his earlier discussion of the “linguistic continuum.”<sup>67</sup> Again, these insights reverberate in *Enchanted Chains*, where Idel points towards a more cohesive understanding of Judaism at least on the sociological level, by writing “Jews are united because they share the same semantic world.”<sup>68</sup>

## Concluding Remarks

It is my own feeling that the connective hypothesis, anchored as it is in numerous central Jewish texts, can be seen as an important method for gaining a sense of the nature of Jewish religiosity as a whole, as well as a powerful tool for comparative research. Its advantage lies in that it brings us closer to the worldview of the authors of classical Jewish texts, rather than imposing modern agenda on them, or otherwise moving their readers away from the structures inherent in the texts. As Idel himself has suggested, this recent move of his can be said to bring together many strands found in dozens of books and many hundreds of

63 Moshe Idel, “Die Laut Gelsen Tora, Stimmengemeinschaft in der Juedischen Mystik”, *Zwischen Rauschen und Offenbarung, zur Kultur- und Mediengeschichte Der Stimme*, eds. Th. Macho und s. Weigel (Berlin, 2002), pp. 19-53.

64 See especially *ibid*, pp. 27, 53-64, 205-212.

65 Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, p. 410. Compare to *Hasidism*, p. 215; *Kabbalah and Eros*, p. 98; *Ascensions On High*, p. 232; *Enchanted Chains*, pp. 25-26, as well as an earlier formulation in *Messianic Mystics*, p. 355, n. 72.

66 *Absorbing Perfections*, p. 411.

67 *Hasidism*, p. 217. On the concept of the continuum, which can be seen as a further theoretical tool, see also *Messianic Mystics*, p. 113; *Ascensions on High*, p. 216.

68 Idel, *Enchanted Chains*, p. 221.

articles written by him over the years, only a small sample of which was mentioned here.

The ramifications of this move may extend beyond those claimed by Idel himself: The chain of memory is not merely an oft-recurring theme in Jewish writing, but can be a device to determine the extent to which an idea or practice is itself connected to the chain of Jewish continuity or subsidiary or tangential to the main thrust of the tradition, and this tool may be useful for the study of other religions. If, as Hervieu-Léger put it, the “distinctive mark” of tradition is to restore to human lives the “living memory of an essential core,”<sup>69</sup> then religion’s own self-awareness includes a sense of an essential core. Therefore, although scholarly investigation can readily show that this core is constructive rather than objective, nonetheless it would do well not to distance itself overly from the self-formulation of the tradition as study, whilst not of course being enchained by it. Therefore, Idel’s “chain hypothesis” can be seen as a corrective to the centrifugal elements in his own analysis.

However, one can glimpse possibilities beyond the study of a specific tradition. Following Gardner’s Multiple Intelligences theory,<sup>70</sup> one could conjecture that the durability of religious practice lies not so much in the fostering of “spiritual intelligence”<sup>71</sup> but rather in enhancing a form of “social intelligence,”<sup>72</sup> through the bonds and networks created by the chain of memory, a trait which can become a “survival skill” in a diasporic religion such as Judaism.

Although Idel himself is an extremely complex thinker, whose current direction cannot be easily summarized,<sup>73</sup> I believe that the theme of connectivity allows us for more than a glimpse at an important “vector”, to use a term favored by Idel, of his ongoing research project. In his *Enchanted Chains*, Idel repeatedly stresses that he is by no means exhausting the “varieties of connectivity”, to coin a phrase. The surprising power of the theme of deep connection between God and the Jewish people will be the subject of his forthcoming voluminous study of the trope of “The Son of God”.

69 *Religion as a Chain of Memory*, p. 88.

70 See Howard Gardner, *Multiple Intelligences: New Horizons* (New York, 2006).

71 See e.g. Tony Buzan, *The Power of Spiritual Intelligence: Ten Ways to Tap into your Spiritual Genius* (London, 2002).

72 See Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence* (New York, 2006).

73 Especially as Idel continues to balance the theoretical focus that I emphasized here with ongoing textual and historical studies of a far more specific nature, such as his work on the Ashkenazi proto-Kabbalist, R. Nehemiah ben Shlomo ha-Navi.

**DANIEL ABRAMS**

## A Critical Return to Moshe Idel's Kabbalah: New Perspectives: An Appreciation

### **Abstract:**

The publication of Moshe Idel's book, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* marks a turning point in the field of Jewish mysticism. In this volume, Moshe Idel offered phenomenology as an alternative key to appreciating the history and ideas of Jewish mystical traditions. This study returns to this book in order to assess and critique the meaning and function of phenomenology in his early scholarship, as a prelude to the developing and possibly changing methodologies that he has employed in numerous studies published since the appearance of his now classic study. The study considers the connection between phenomenology and experience and its role within the multiple perspectives suggested in the volume. Moshe Idel's methodology is thus appreciated within the larger context of his work, positioned within the history of scholarship in the field and serves as a measure of the turn to new perspectives.

Moshe Idel's work and persona have had a tremendous impact on a generation of scholars who have enjoyed the fruits of his erudition and open minded consideration of new possibilities for Kabbalah research. His scholarly publications have illuminated many subjects, historical periods, and this from numerous methodological perspectives. Indeed, there are many Moshe Idels which are manifest in the various platforms, languages and genres of his published works. Here, I would like to share my appreciation of the Moshe Idel I first met in a summer course I took in New York in the late 1980s and experienced shortly thereafter in print with the publication of *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, namely erudition combined with a creative openness to rethink basic assumptions. I remember being impressed by his uncompromising appreciation for these two essential pillars of scholarship, even when I had no idea what the study of

Jewish mysticism entailed. From conversations with him, I could detect his silent disdain for the blind acceptance of generalized conclusions and his unexpressed pleasure in any critical engagement of the sources. I believe that it is appropriate therefore to offer this critical return to his first monograph and appreciate the methodology set forth in it. My aim here is to be complimentary by assessing the contribution of his achievement, beginning with this monumental book, no less than in critiquing his methodology as a testimony to his openness and his tireless search for newer perspectives and advances in the study of Jewish mysticism. In what follows, I will present the first part of a more expanded study on Idel's methodology, which will be published elsewhere in full. The current discussion will be limited to the rather central question of the meaning and function of phenomenology in Idel's first major monograph.

The publication twenty years ago of Moshe Idel's *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (KNP) marked a turning point in the study of Jewish mysticism.<sup>1</sup> This book offered more than a new thesis statement. It proposes *various* new perspectives to the study of Jewish esotericism and mystical phenomena. Against the common assumptions about what this book and his scholarly corpus claim, Idel, as I read him, seeks to destabilize prior conclusions and dogmas of the field in order to open up the sources to ever-new scrutiny, while remaining vigilant about preserving scholarly distance, so as not to replace a former ideology with a newer currency of academic beliefs. KNP therefore presumes a distinction between methodology and the scholarly conclusions that result from any one inquiry, even if these categories are functionally blurred in the execution of any study. Beginning with KNP and argued in different forms, Idel claims to have no particular perspective, applying various methodologies which were excluded from previous studies of Kabbalah.

In the limited context of this paper, I will not attempt a comprehensive overview of Idel's methods nor will it be possible to fully document his implementation of 'phenomenology'.<sup>2</sup> Instead, I will offer what I trust will be some observations on how phenomenology functions within Idel's first major monograph, and some related studies published subsequently, in order to highlight the development and changes in his thought. Such developments and shifts across his studies reveal a necessary tension in reading his works as a whole and offer an opportunity for interrogating the changes in his methodology over the years. In this essay, I will chart the major moves that have constructed Idel's methodologies and present the recurring strategy that characterizes his approach to the study of Jewish mysticism.

1 Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, London and New Haven 1988.

2 For an annotated listing of the all his publications through 1997 see: *Bibliography of the Writings of Professor Moshe Idel*, edited and annotated by Daniel Abrams, Los Angeles 1997 [Hebrew/English].

The Moshe Idel I know is bored with summaries and thrives on critical engagements that challenge existing assumptions, including foremost his own. As I have learned from him, every method necessarily offers certain benefits and limitations and it is the responsibility of every scholar to employ the methods most appropriate for a given context and problem. As a scholar, he is allergic to all ideologies, whether they be political, hermeneutic or religious, because they predetermine the outcome of the act of reading by essentializing issues, and in many cases they substitute for reading and remove the need to ask critical questions about possible interpretations. Idel is weary of long-term attachments to conceptual approaches and has little patience for inquiries into Jewish mysticism which do not emerge from the reading of manuscripts or rely exclusively on sources already treated in the secondary literature. In Idel's study of Jewish mysticism, nothing is outright excluded from any inquiry, and KNP in particular is structured around those areas which were dismissed, for whatever reasons, by earlier scholarship. Idel's openness is kept in check by scholarly erudition that is responsible to textual detail, and the choice of the method of inquiry is based on the literary and cultural context of the texts and the religious phenomena. My conscious aim in this essay is to be complimentary by assessing the contribution of his achievement, no less than to critique his methodology as a testimony to his openness and tireless search for newer perspectives and advances for the study of Jewish mysticism. After many years of reading manuscript sources, Idel published a number of important and original studies, which culminated in the first theoretical presentation of his overview of the field and break with commonly held assumptions, mainly those forwarded in the works of Scholem.

I would venture to say that the major point of Idel's departure from the methodologies of Scholem revolves around the position of the scholar from within and without of the tradition. While the matter is complex in the rich corpora of each these scholars, Scholem often searched for foreign influences while Idel gives maximum credence to the kabbalists' claim of ancient roots in investigating the possibilities. Nevertheless, both scholars sought objectivity through intellectual otherness. Scholem at one point admitted an affinity, true or desired, between his identity and that of the Christian kabbalist, Johannes Reuchlin.<sup>3</sup> I wish to compare this reflection by Scholem to Idel's fundamental use of R. Abraham Abulafia's Ecstatic Kabbalah as a means of charting the divergence and later convergence of kabbalistic systems and appreciating the

3 Gershom Scholem, 'Die Erforschung der Kabbala, von Reuchlin bis zur Gegenwart', Vortrag gehalten anlässlich der Entgegennahme des Reuchlin-Preises der Stadt Pforzheim, 10. Sept. 1969, p. 1, Pforzheim, 1969; reprinted in *Judaica: Studien zur jüdischen Mystik*, Frankfurt am Main 1970, III, pp. 247-264 (p. 247), and translated in Hebrew in: Scholem, *Explications and Implications: Writings on Jewish Heritage and Renaissance*, Tel Aviv 1986, vol. 2, pp. 309-320 (p. 309). See the discussion of David Biale, *Gershom Scholem: Kabbalah and Counter-History*, Cambridge and London 1979, p. 31.

attempts at reordering kabbalistic traditions. In such a comparison, Scholem's history of ideas can be seen as a non-traditional appraisal, removed from the inner presumptions of the kabbalistic tradition. Idel's orientation, by contrast, is similarly based on difference, but *from within* the Jewish mystical tradition. Stated in terms of 'phenomenology', the scholar who compares both schools without being personally invested in either one, finds sufficient difference within the Jewish mystical tradition to achieve the critical distance necessary to construct a history of Kabbalah.

Even within Scholem's appreciation of Ecstatic Kabbalah as a separate school of Kabbalah, and worthy of its own chapter and designation as a trend in *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, Idel's scholarly program rejects the subsuming power of a historically layered and comprehensive assessment that places the prophetic Kabbalah within the strictures of a history of theosophic Kabbalah.<sup>4</sup> The move from trends to phenomena allows for the inclusion of aspects of Kabbalah that did not find their place in prior historical schematizations.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, by breaking down the historical boundaries that delineated the chapters of Scholem's inquiries, Idel is better positioned to trace the later influence, re-appearance and transformation of traditions in later times, not to mention freely documenting earlier precedents of esoteric traditions and mystical techniques.<sup>6</sup> It should be noted further that in an important study on the relationship of Kabbalah to rabbinic literature (1991), Idel critiqued what he called, 'Scholem's Phenomenology of Judaism', by which he compared Scholem's structuring of Jewish traditions over the centuries outside of the major trends of Jewish mysticism and the library of sources unique to the Jewish mystical tradition. This terminology places these studies of Scholem under the same methodological rubric of Idel's program, even if he is highly critical of

4 This despite his comments on the chapter in *Major Trends* in his article, Moshe Idel, 'The Contribution of Abraham Abulafia's Kabbalah to the Understanding of Jewish Mysticism', Gershom Scholem's *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism: 50 Years After*, ed. P. Schäfer and J. Dan, Tübingen 1993, p. 119.

5 See Ioan Culianu, 'Kabbalah Revisited: Review of Kabbalah: New Perspectives by Moshe Idel', *History of Religions* 30 (1990), pp. 215-217, esp. p. 216: 'Once cannot say that Scholem ever undertook a history of Kabbalah or a presentation of all its possible themes.' (emphasis in original).

6 Scholem's historical writing suffered methodologically from its division into trends in that it could not appreciate the life of a text or idea across various periods, not to mention the reformulation of text within its reception history (Daniel Abrams, 'The Condensation of the Symbol "Shekhinah" in the Manuscripts of the Book Bahir', *Kabbalah* 16 (2007), pp. 7-82). Scholem's survey of early Kabbalah, further suffered because of the expanded treatment of the Bahir through Geronese kabbalists (including a number of other texts and circles in the thirteenth century) as a separate volume, *Reshit ha-Qabbalah*, Jerusalem 1948 and published in an expanded English version as *Origins of the Kabbalah*, Princeton and Philadelphia 1948. (see my 'Critical and Post-Critical Textual Scholarship of Jewish Mystical Literature: Notes on the History and Development of Modern Editing Techniques', *Kabbalah* 1 (1996), pp. 17-19). This is especially important for an appreciation of Abulafia's placement in Scholem's historiography of Kabbalah since the Ecstatic Kabbalah was positioned between German Pietism and the Zohar in *Major Trends*.

Scholem's basic assumptions and conclusions.<sup>7</sup> Phenomenology here seems to imply a comparison between different systems that are not necessarily interlinked as evolving historically one from the other in causal chains of influence and reaction, but are presented by the scholar in a history that is a reconstruction of affinities between the disparate bodies of knowledge.

## A Critical Return to Kabbalah: New Perspectives

A critical return to KNP is both outdated and long overdo.<sup>8</sup> Upon its publication in 1988, few could appreciate the book or predict its later influence. Today, it is difficult to read it outside of the prism of his later publications and numerous developments in the field. Unchanging has been Idel's conviction that ideology blinds the scholar and restricts thinking about alternative possibilities. According to Idel, as scholarship develops through time and specific studies explore in detail the richness of texts and religious phenomena, the field necessarily becomes more complex.<sup>9</sup> This runs in the face of popular assumptions which are based, I believe, in a numinous regard for kabbalistic literature, where even its academic study is revered as somehow separate from the other branches of Jewish studies. Even within Jewish studies as a whole, and possibly most strongly in social history, many wish for an authoritative scholar to sift through the difficult sources and present conclusions for wider (scholarly) consumption. Accordingly, the prevalent expectation is that the more that Kabbalah is investigated and its research published, the clearer the picture should become, correcting, proving and fine-

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7 See Moshe Idel's criticism and explanation of Scholem and Tishby's phenomenology and historiography in his article, 'History of the Kabbalah and History of the Jews', *Theory and Criticism* 6 (1995) pp. 137-147, esp. pp. 146-147 [Hebrew]. (This study serves as a précis of Idel's critique of the historical assumptions that guided past scholarship). For Scholem's own reflections on 'phenomenology' and the theurgic interpretation of ritual see the fascinating comment in: *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, p. 121: 'The ritual of Rabbinical Judaism makes nothing happen and transforms nothing. ... a penetrating phenomenology of Rabbinical Judaism would be needed to determine the nature of the powers of remembrance that made this possible and to decide whether other secret factors may not after all have contributed to this vitality' (emphasis in original).

8 See, however, the important discussion of Hava Tirosh-Rothschild, 'Continuity and Revision in the Study of Kabbalah', *AJS Review* 16 (1991), pp. 161-192. For more recent appraisals of the field with respect to Idel's methodology and influence see Peter Schäfer, 'Jewish Mysticism in the Twentieth Century', *Jewish Studies at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*, ed. J. Borrás and A. Sáñezbadillos, Leiden, Boston, Köln 1999, pp. 3-18, esp. pp. 13-16; Elisabeth Hamacher, *Gershom Scholem und die Allgemeine Religionsgeschichte*, Berlin-New York 1999, pp. 34-36; Daniel Weidner, *Gershom Scholem: Politisches, esoterisches und historiographisches Schreiben*, München 2003, p. 341; J. H. Laenen, 'The Twilight between Scholarship and Mysticism', *Zutot* 2 (2002) 189-199.

9 Moshe Idel, 'Kabbalah Research: From Monochromatism to Polymorphism', *Studia Judaica* 8 (1999), pp. 15-46.

tuning the conclusions of academic predecessors. Idel's optimism, or perhaps his openness, rejects this assumption and views serious scholarship as indebted to detail, complexity and tension between perspectives, so that all generalizations become *increasingly* inappropriate over time. Moreover, in Idel's academic writing and thinking, theology is a dirty word, marking the abandonment of difference, whereby multiplicity is systematized under a rubric of answers that are modified to agree with the demands of internal consistency.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the serious study of Jewish mysticism is based on an antipathy to committed scholarship that is invested in theology or any other ideology, and so preserves the maximal ability to identify difference from a vantage point of neutrality.

KNP, as I read it, aims at polyvocality, valorizing the multiple voices in the corpora of Jewish mystical literature and the various methodological approaches at the modern scholar's disposal in adducing the texts and religious phenomena. Put negatively, the 'new perspectives' in the title of KNP is not intended to express Idel's new perspective, but is offered as his assessment of the untapped riches of related disciplines as they are brought to bear upon the study of Kabbalah: 'Even when the first stages of historical-textual studies were far in the past, the approach was not enriched by additional perspectives.'<sup>11</sup> This statement is made in his sub-chapter, 'An Appraisal of a Phenomenological Approach', showing the overlap between 'perspectives' and 'phenomenology' in this work. Phenomenology carries yet another sense in KNP, referring to the categories of religious events that are worthy of note in the scholar's purview, whether they be literary or experiential. Here too, however, the recognition of mystical phenomena as *phenomenology* overlaps with a scholarly perspective, so that Idel calls for the scrutinizing of 'experiential phenomena' which have been neglected or marginalized in the past with new methodologies such as 'myth, symbolism, and mysticism',<sup>12</sup> and even psychology, in order to offer a new focus to the field of Jewish Mysticism, and render new conclusions specific to his book.<sup>13</sup> The new perspectives of KNP include more than the use of other disciplines as methodological tools. KNP is adamant that types of literature have been overlooked to present a one-sided portrayal of what is to be expected from such subjects as myth, Rabbinism and the historical development of the trends of Jewish mysticism.<sup>14</sup>

KNP begins with a discussion of 'critical approaches' and the 'criticism' of the texts and religious phenomena which constitute Jewish mysticism. The ground is

10 Moshe Idel, 'On the Theologization of Kabbalah in Modern Scholarship', *Religious Apologetics - Philosophical Argumentation*, ed. Y. Schwartz and V. Krech, Tübingen 2004, pp. 123-174.

11 KNP, p. 23.

12 KNP, p. 23.

13 KNP, pp. 24-25.

14 See also Moshe Idel, 'Sexual Metaphors and Praxis in the Kabbalah', *The Jewish Family: Metaphor and Memory*, ed. D. Kraemer, New York and Oxford, 1989, pp. 179-224. Idem, 'Some Remarks on Ritual and Mysticism in Geronese Kabbalah', *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 3 (1993), pp. 111-130.

thus laid in the opening chapter of the book for a history of such surveys in order to characterize and delimit earlier treatments, from the middle ages though the scholarly achievements of Gershom Scholem. Idel's choice of these parameters works in competing directions as he wishes to expand the range of insights to include the consideration of associations raised in the traditional sources, against the presumptions and limitations of prior academic scholarship. At the same time, he culls from medieval, Renaissance and Early Modern sources those comments which offer comparisons between ideas and texts of different orientations and historical periods. Moving from the more pointed attacks on the first kabbalists to the observations of Jews and Christians in the Renaissance, Idel sifts through ideologically invested attacks to outline a history of comments, that although not intended as such, amount to critical appraisals of the history of Kabbalah.

Important here are observations which note difference between the religious character of doctrines and those which provide the corner stones of the periodization of Jewish and kabbalistic literature, including foremost the identification of foreign and late sources which helped create kabbalistic literature. 'Critique' and 'criticism' in their polemical sense of religious and culturally motivated attacks on ideology and heterodoxy are appreciated in the historicist sense because of the contrast in competing systems of thought for what they yield in observing the uniqueness and contexts of religious phenomena.<sup>15</sup> Put differently, traditional claims within kabbalistic literature are first scrutinized from without, so that the academic scholar can consider the literature from within the corpus and mindset, in order to extract the important moves that construct a history of ideas. Although indebted to its roots in the history of religions and various predecessors in the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, KNP is fine-tuned to identifying the affinities between literatures. By taking the lead for such an investigation from the prior observations made by figures who were ideologically invested with faith-based claims, KNP breaks down much of the difference between criticism and modern academic methods and thus constructs a particular type of phenomenology. Idel is aware of this relationship when he writes that, 'modern scholarship has only elaborated, deepened or explicated their findings.'<sup>16</sup>

The academic reception of KNP has largely been polarized between the acceptance of a new set of conclusions about the history of Jewish mysticism and a rejection of his presentation in favor of a defensive loyalty to the scholarly persona and literary presentation of Gershom Scholem.<sup>17</sup> Both, in my opinion are

15 For similar phrasing see KNP, p. 10.

16 KNP, p. 5.

17 For a statement of the magnetism of Scholem's (scholarly) charisma see Idel's comments in 'Rabbinism Versus Kabbalism: On G. Scholem's Phenomenology', *Modern Judaism* 11 (1991), p. 282: 'Of Judaism Just like a magnet which restructures a magnetic field it enters charging, at the same time, the constituting entities with its own valency, so did Scholem bestow modern Judaica scholars with valences of his own. However, with the discovery of new Kabbalistic material and the disappearance of the magnetic power

misplaced.<sup>18</sup> Despite Idel's framing of his research and conclusions in terms of Scholem's methods, thinking and the rich bibliography of his printed studies, Idel sought to free Kabbalah research from dogma by sharply distinguishing between research about Kabbalah and the kabbalistic sources themselves.

Scholem dedicated his life to revitalizing Jewish life and culture against a rationalist ideology of assimilation that turned its back on the mythic pulse of sources exemplified by Kabbalah. Scholem became a cultural icon for many, becoming the supreme authority, and for many, identical with the Kabbalah itself, so that to cite the idea of 'the Kabbalah', a reference would be offered to Scholem and not to a kabbalistic source.<sup>19</sup> KNP was as much a return to Scholem's methods of reading the sources as it was a rejection of the dogmatic reception of how many perceived Scholem's work. In this context, phenomenology becomes the foil that empowers the individual scholar to arrive at independent observations from manuscript sources without becoming beholden to the edifice of the historical program of prior scholarship. Phenomenology functions in KNP as one scholar's impressions of recurring patterns of thought, themes or myths.<sup>20</sup> This implies therefore that another scholar might arrive at a separate, and potentially equally legitimate, phenomenology. Both subjective and ahistorical, this understanding of phenomenology is liberating for a field that has reified its own conclusions.

## 'Phenomenology' in Kabbalah: New Perspectives

Phenomenology is of course a major topic in philosophy, most known from the works of Husserl and more recently Sartre and Merleau-Ponty. Idel decidedly does not draw upon this philosophical tradition when employing the term in his work. Even if not referred to specifically, what is relevant from the philosophical theory is the distinction between epistemology and subjective experience. Impressions and scholarly subjectivity are at issue when Idel notes the difference between the Kabbalah 'according to the perception of the kabbalists themselves'<sup>21</sup> and Kabbalah

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of Scholem's personality, it now seems that the field of Judaica in general and that of Jewish mysticism in particular is more prepared for a complex restructuring.

18 For a discussion of the various types of responses and reviews to KNP see Nathaniel Deutsch, 'Mahloket', *Incognita* 2 (1991), pp. 241-250.

19 KNP, p. 17.

20 See the criticism of Roland Kiener in his review of KNP, *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 82, (1991), pp. 224-226: 'Significant theories are backed up with no more than catch-phrases like "it stands to reason that..." or "it seems reasonable to regard..."', and the proclamation "I assume" appears with singular frequency in many of Idel's discussions. Substantiations of textual evidence are often few and far between these reconstructive threads. Such are the pitfalls of a reconstructive methodology' (p. 226).

21 KNP, p. 28.

as perceived from 'an academic perspective' in line with Scholem's research. Here too, Idel employs the term phenomenology to describe prior assessments: 'The historicist bias of the academic perspective, if not coupled with the sensibility that grows out of the phenomenological effort to understand a mystical phenomenon as an entity in itself, may cut the dialogue short at the beginning.'<sup>22</sup>

Idel thus finds his opening in privileging experience as a methodological tool in evaluating Kabbalah, repositioning himself with respect to prior scholarly attempts to write a history of the doctrines somehow contained within kabbalistic literature.<sup>23</sup> One of the main facets of this approach was to theorize the way Kabbalah functioned for kabbalists as a lived system of religious practice and experience that maintains the upper world and draws down blessing from above. So, for example, KNP and other studies focus on mystical techniques, the mystical reinterpretation of the commandments (*ta'amei ha-mizvot* as well as their theurgic effect), incidentally laying the groundwork for later research on nomian and anomian speculation in Jewish mystical literature. The doctrinal yield of Scholem's appraisal of theosophic Kabbalah was now re-designated as the theosophic-theurgic Kabbalah (instead of just 'theosophy'), heightening the contrast with Abulafia's Prophetic Kabbalah.

In my reading of KNP and subsequent studies published by Idel, I note a constant tension on clearly identifying the object of study. Certainly the stated goal is to appreciate and interpret the texts and phenomena from within their own contexts in order to link them together into a history of ideas. The first is natural or immanent to the texts or religious lives of the kabbalists and the second is the product and interest of the modern scholar. There need not be a necessary conflict between these enterprises, but a qualitative difference remains at the outset. The crucial juncture perhaps is with the identification of 'central' myths that amount to the 'structure' of Jewish mysticism, as implicitly known to the kabbalists and that are formulated abstractly in the exposition of modern scholarship. This structure might indeed be synonymous with what Idel intends as a phenomenology of Jewish mysticism.

Turning once again to the text of KNP, we can identify various definitions of phenomenology. The more common use of the term which echoes the stated methodology of the book, even when the term is not cited, is this scholar's impressions from his reading of a wide range of material:

It has nevertheless been undertaken in order to supply insights resulting either from my perusal of Kabbalistic material unavailable to Scholem (some has been unearthed only since the late sixties) or from my focusing on portions of the material that were dealt with by Scholem only in passing. The very fact that a substantial number of the quotations cited in the following discussions stem from manuscript sources illustrates

<sup>22</sup> KNP, p. 26.

<sup>23</sup> See more recently Joëlle Hansel, 'La Cabale, Doctrine ou expérience?', *Revue des études juives* 163 (2004), pp. 301-308.

the need to return to the path opened by Scholem and explore available manuscripts before attempting more general discussions of the nature of Kabbalah.<sup>24</sup>

Idel joins Scholem in stating that a full history of Kabbalah cannot be written, and at best, according to Scholem's conscious compromise, chapters on its 'major trends' could only be composed in the early years of scholarship. As both scholars have intimated, Kabbalah is comprised of many schools and traditions and it would be imprudent to speak of 'the Kabbalah'. Instead, traditions are culled from the vast corpus of writings in manuscript and print in order to present an overview that explicates various issues significant to the modern scholar. Scholem's organization of the major trends of Jewish mysticism is thus admittedly arbitrary even if it was later reified as obvious in his later studies and in the work of later scholars. Although never presented systematically by the kabbalists, Idel too presumes that these texts emerge from 'elaborate bodies of mystical thought, [and] that although they may be difficult to understand, [they] nevertheless reflect comprehensive approaches rather than brief insights or remarks'<sup>25</sup> We can summarize this first sense of phenomenology as the subjective impression of the scholar of Jewish mysticism in assessing the main themes and character of the unsystematic *presentations* of traditions in various periods which conceal a deeper organization of ideas.

A second sense of phenomenology in KNP is the identification by the modern scholar of central myths of Kabbalah that are based on the medieval kabbalists' reconstruction of ancient, 'subterranean' traditions that resurfaced in later times. The legitimacy of this method is based on a approach which Idel distinguishes from his predecessors and which is seen to be in consort with the kabbalists:

Furthermore, an attempt to study Jewish mysticism along the lines I have proposed has a manifest methodological advantage: it postulates a relatively organic evolution of Jewish mysticism that can be demonstrated by using Hebrew material found in the various layers of Jewish literature and that, consequently, can also be rejected by philological or historical analysis of the texts. It is obvious that my proposal is consonant with some of the assertions of the Kabbalists themselves, who repeatedly asserted that the Kabbalah is a genuine ancient tradition which is an esoteric interpretation of Judaism. This self-perception has been systematically disregarded by modern research of Kabbalah, with no detailed analysis.<sup>26</sup>

Reconstruction presumes that theosophic Kabbalah is 'a systematic exposition of a worldview' of the fragmentary traditions of antiquity. Here, the historian's phenomenology seeks to identify the recurring patterns of associations found between the various textual units of antique Judaism that served the kabbalists in

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24 KNP, p. 19.

25 KNP, p. 21.

26 KNP, pp. 31-32.

offering a unified picture of their thought. These associations were not identified nor created in Idel's reading, but were rather preserved through written and oral transmission:

I assume that Kabbalah has probably preserved some ancient conceptual structures that supply a more unified view of the otherwise unrelated and sometimes unintelligible motifs and texts. This reconstructionist approach mostly concerns the pre-Kabbalistic texts, the understanding of which can be improved by applying a previously unexpected conceptual structure to an ancient text. The adequacy of this method, however, is indirectly important for the question of the antiquity of the Kabbalah; the possibility of approaching some ancient material with the help of modes of thinking preserved in Kabbalah may demonstrate that this lore not only makes use of older motifs but also continues more comprehensive intellectual patterns.<sup>27</sup>

The academic agenda of KNP rests upon an optimism of validating the claims of the kabbalists, that their traditions have ancient roots. While Idel does not discount the possibility that traditions were transmitted orally, he nevertheless does not approach the problem from within the categories of the kabbalists. Behind Idel's search for the historical continuity of Jewish mystical traditions is a looming sensitivity to myths that hover over or within earlier sources, from the bible and through rabbinic traditions, and which were passed on to the kabbalists, understood as medieval rabbinic figures. Against Scholem's reading, myth is the thread, internal to Jewish traditions, that offers a great measure of continuity and even an ahistorical appreciation of how sources were and can be read. Idel's phenomenology thus bridges the gap created in Scholem's thinking between Rabbinism and Kabbalism. Put differently, if it can be shown that a kabbalistic idea or pattern of thinking existed in ancient times, the medieval Kabbalah is better appreciated as the return to traditions that were preserved from antiquity. As Idel writes:

Therefore, it is as fruitful to discuss Kabbalistic phenomena in contradistinction to one another as to give a chronological account. The unfolding of the key concepts that characterized and directed Kabbalistic activity and thought, their exposition as atemporal modes, and the understanding of their interplay in various Kabbalistic schools is the 'inner' history of Kabbalah or of Jewish mysticism, just as the temporal description can be considered the 'outer' history.<sup>28</sup>

History serves as the temporal backdrop for the growth and merging of traditions, not their cause or full context. Numerous examples could be cited from Idel's later publications, foremost amongst them are those that challenge

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27 KNP, p. 33. See, however, KNP 21: I would like to stress that Kabbalah may well be the result of certain religious developments without, however, stemming in its entirety from such earlier periods.

28 KNP, p. xiii.

Scholem's argument for a causal connection between the Expulsion from Spain and messianism. As many may know, Idel explains such developments as the meeting of cultures and traditions due to the geographic displacements of figures and ideas that forced or prompted new interactions such as those that took place Italy and with the rise of Hasidism.<sup>29</sup>

The phenomenology that Idel works with in *KNP* is in constant dialogue with the demands of both an ahistorical survey of the forms of experience and the temporal and geographic contextualization of their appearances across the full range of Jewish mystical activity. I understand this as a dialectic, neither a sign of methodological ambivalence, nor of a lack of clarity on his part. Idel is most comfortable navigating his way through different structures of thought without being committed to any one form. This is his strength for within this flexibility, he is able to remain faithful to the demands of the texts and their contexts. For Idel, methodological commitment concretizes the results in advance of their detailed analysis and becomes the major pitfall of the modern scholar. Idel, as I understand him, is on guard against overarching systems of thought that impose structures on the texts or harmonize competing traditions. With the publication of *KNP*, the study of Jewish mysticism moved into a new era that sought and appreciated more complex explanations to the phenomena of Jewish mysticism.

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29 Moshe Idel, 'Introduction', A.Z. Eshkoli, *Messianic Movements in Israel*, Jerusalem 1987, pp. 9-28 [Hebrew]; idem, 'Encounters between Spanish and Italian Kabbalists in the Generation of the Expulsion', *Crisis and Creativity in the Sephardic World, 1391-1648*, ed. B. Gampel. New York 1997, pp. 189-222; idem, 'Religion, Thought and Attitudes: The Impact of the Expulsion on the Jews', *Spain and the Jews – The Sephardi Experience, 1492 and After*, ed. E. Kedourie, London 1992, pp. 123-139. A special treatment was devoted to the comparison of approaches to the *Expulsion its aftermath* (unseen): John Steven Sewell, 'Lurianic Kabbalah and the Expulsion of 1492: The Scholem-Idel Debate', M.A. Thesis, Arizona State University, 1999.

**RON MARGOLIN**

## Moshe Idel's Phenomenology and its Sources

### **Abstract:**

This article opens with a brief phenomenological comparison between Gershom Scholem's *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* and Moshe Idel's *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*. Scholem's book is diachronic or historical in approach while Idel's is primarily synchronistic, focusing on *devekut* (devotion) in Jewish Mysticism, the concept of *Unio Mystica*, a variety of mystical techniques, Kabbalistic theosophy, theurgy, and Kabbalistic hermeneutics.

The author concentrates on four characteristics of Idel's studies in Kabbalah and Jewish mysticism: ecstatic Kabbalah, the definition of Jewish mysticism, Hasidism as a spiritual movement and the study of Jewish magic. In addition he discusses key criticisms leveled at Idel's treatment of these subjects.

Moshe Idel's book, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, was published by Yale University in 1988, forty seven years after the publication of Gershom Scholem's *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*. Scholem's book established a new, separate field of research in Jewish Studies, termed Jewish Mysticism and Kabbalah, which became an independent academic field in the mid twentieth century. Idel's work opened a new era of research in this field, an era characterized by fresh thinking, which, though respectful and appreciative of previous research, was open to new directions of research that could enrich, add depth, and refresh our understanding of Jewish mysticism and Kabbalah. For almost twenty years, this approach introduced by Moshe Idel to the research of Kabbalah and Jewish Mysticism has been directly and indirectly affecting dozens of researchers working on the subject .

### **Idel's Phenomenology**

Scholem's work was written diachronically, meaning that the knowledge of what Scholem termed the mystical branches of Judaism was arranged by historical period. This book was written according to a scheme laid out by Martin Buber thirty

five years earlier, in the introduction to his work *The Tales of Rabbi Nachman*, titled *Der Jüdische Mystik*. In this introduction, Buber reviewed the different stages in the development of the mystical tradition of Judaism. He started with the roots of this tradition in the middle ages and the creation of the Zohar, the Kabbalah of Safed, centered around the Kabbalah of Rabbi Isaac Luria (*He-Ari*), described by him as a reaction to the Expulsion from Spain, and in the reappearance of this Kabbalistic tradition in the Messianic Shabtai Zvi movement. Hasidism, established by a small circle centered on the character of Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov in Eastern Europe in the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century, was described in the scheme adopted by Scholem as the final stage of this mystical tradition. Unlike Buber, who devoted most of his interest to Hasidism, Gershom Scholem dedicated elaborate studies to the review of each of these stages.

Idel, in *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, raised numerous problems in the research of Kabbalah as based on Scholem's book, and offered new categories of thought for the examination of the large body of work chronologically reviewed in the latter's seminal work. Idel's book is arranged primarily according to a synchronistic research approach, and therefore each section is dedicated to a different issue in the study of Kabbalah: varieties of Devekut (devotion) in Jewish Mysticism, Unio Mystica, mystical techniques, Kabbalistic theosophy, theurgy, and Kabbalistic hermeneutics.

The book's division into these issues reflects Idel's decision to use a phenomenological research method, very much free of the chronological structure outlined for Kabbalah research by Scholem. This choice is not an innovation, but rather a decision in favor of emphasizing the phenomenological, rather than the historical, element in the ideological research of Kabbalah and Jewish mysticism. Idel did not neglect or ignore the historical-philological aspect, which was Scholem's main concern, just as Scholem was involved not only in historical-philological research, but also laid the foundation to the phenomenological research of Kabbalah and Jewish Mysticism. Most of Scholem's phenomenological essays were the fruit of his participation in the Eranos Conferences in Switzerland, starting in 1949.<sup>1</sup>

Idel's innovation is found mainly in shifting the balance between the historical and the phenomenological elements. In Scholem's works, the historical element served as the anchor and the starting point of any discussion. This principle was retained by him even in phenomenological studies, in which he usually focused on issues from the spiritual world of Kabbalah, such as the Torah, the Zaddik, the Gilgul (reincarnation), the Zelem (image of God), good and evil, the Shekhinah, the

1 Since 1933, the Eranos Conferences have been held at Ascona in southern Switzerland at the villa of Mrs. Olga Froebe-Kaptain. Distinguished scholars from Europe, Asia, and America have been invited to a "shared feast" (eranos) and have lectured on themes chosen by Mrs. Froebe-Kaptain who published the lectures in the *Eranos-Jahrbucher*.

Golem, etc., while arranging the discussion on basis of the historical development of each of the topics of discussion.

The focus of discussion in Idel's *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, is different from that in Scholem's phenomenological studies. I believe that this difference testifies to a change of focus in the phenomenological outlook. Scholem's focus is content-related, while in Idel's work, the organization of the content-related discussion around fundamental concepts in religion studies is evident. Idel's decision in favor of a phenomenological method, placing at the center of discussion fundamental concepts of general religious studies, is connected to his great interest in general religious studies, and especially in the works of Mircea Eliade, who also started since 1950 to regularly attend the Eranos Conferences in Ascona. Idel diligently read through all of Eliade's work, from the stories written in Romanian and were not translated into other languages, through to the last of his comparative religion studies, written during his years of working in the USA. Idel's comprehensive familiarity with Eliade's studies, as well as with other researches in religious studies, especially those concerned with the phenomenology of religion, contributed to his tendency to change the methodology of Kabbalah and Jewish mystical research, and to place at the center of discussion not only historical periods or intra-Kabbalistic matters, but also key concepts in general religious studies. Earlier phenomenological works in Kabbalah research were usually diachronic in character, like Scholem's works discussed above, or focused on a specific historical period or character, like Werblowsky's exemplary book on Rabbi Yosef Karo. Idel's phenomenological approach emphasizes inquiry into different manifestations of phenomena such as theurgy, Unio Mystica or magic, within the entire Kabbalistic-Jewish body of works, on all its periods. In these researches, the historical-diachronic aspect is used as a secondary aid, and the focus is on the actual spiritual phenomenon. This change of emphasis in Idel's methodology reflects a conscious decision to favor the phenomenological element in Scholem's work over the historical element, which was of great importance in the latter's work, in light of his obvious inclination toward a historical view in general, and his commitment to Hegelian dialectic thought in particular. Emphasizing the spiritual phenomena reflected in the entire Kabbalist body of works has opened the field to the interest of new audiences among Jewish studies scholars, and especially among spiritual studies scholars worldwide. Scholem emphasized the uniqueness of Jewish mysticism, in comparison with other forms of mysticism (Scholem 1946, 15-16). Idel's approach suggests that despite the uniqueness of Kabbalah, one interested in phenomena related to religious devotion, theurgy, magic or hermeneutics could find phenomenological parallels, and sometimes even direct or indirect contact, between these phenomena in Kabbalah, and their manifestations in other traditions.

## Ecstatic Kabbalah and its meaning

But I would rather place at the heart of Idel's research work the developments related to his decision to develop on the fourth chapter of Scholem's book, titled Abraham Abulafia and the Doctrine of Prophetic Kabbalism, which has been left rather neglected until the seventies. In fact, Idel's doctorate work on "Abraham Abulafia's Works and Doctrine", which was approved by the Hebrew University in 1976, has been sustaining his work up to the present day. To a large extent, it is the key not only to the insights later expressed in his book, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, discussed earlier, but also to understanding the change generated by Idel's studies in the understanding of the mystical experience and messianism in Kabbalah, and to clarifying the difference between these and the theurgical and magical elements of Kabbalah. It is interesting to note that Idel's first book, based on parts of his doctorate thesis, is titled *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, while the term Kabbalah, rather than mysticism, is used in the title of his second book, discussed above.

This fact actually implies Idel's fundamental argument against Scholem, who differentiated between Jewish writings termed Kabbalistic writings, and the term 'mysticism'. Idel, who devoted years of meticulous work to deciphering the numerous manuscripts of Abulafia's books, has reached the conclusions that Abulafia's objection to the Kabbalah of the Sephirot has more profound meaning than that previously attributed to it. He reexamined the general picture of Kabbalah, as outlined by Scholem and his students, and concluded that the difference between prophetic Kabbalism and theosophical Kabbalism, characterizing much of Kabbalistic literature, should be clarified. The great familiarity Idel has acquired with Abulafia's writings enabled him to understand that later Kabbalistic writings, especially those written in 16<sup>th</sup> century Safed, were a synthesis of different elements that in some respects were even contradictory. Idel called for the clarification of this difference, not just because originally a conscious tension existed between them, but also in order to achieve better understanding of the complexity of Kabbalistic literature in its different periods.

At the heart of Abraham Abulafia's prophetic-ecstatic Kabbalah are techniques intended, as in other mystical traditions, for the achievement of states of altered consciousness, to the point of experiencing the unification of the human mind with the divine, as in *Unio Mystica*. The theosophist-ideological aspect of Kabbalah is focused on learning the inner structure of the divine world, through the Kabbalistic Sephirot system. Scholem argued that the origins of this knowledge are in the introduction of Gnostic systems into the Jewish world in the 12<sup>th</sup> century (Scholem 1987), while Idel, and other researchers, insisted that the fundamental concepts of the Sephirot system are derived from intra-Jewish worlds, including the Rabbinical literature. But as for the use of the term 'mysticism', Idel proposed a differentiation

between the mystical elements, which are basically personal and experiential, and which are entered around the aspiration of achieving even momentary unity with God, and theosophical elements, which are concerned with knowledge of God, acquired through discursive learning, one of the goals of which is to affect God through theurgical means.

### **Jewish Mysticism and its definition**

Idel wished to engage in a discussion on Scholem's conclusions regarding Jewish mysticism, out of an increasing awareness of the gap between the meaning of the more specific usage of the term "mysticism" in the study of general religious experience, and the ambiguous use of the term made by Scholem. Scholem argued that: "It would be a mistake to assume that the whole of what we call mysticism is identical with that personal experience which is realized in the state of ecstasy or ecstatic meditation. Mysticism, as an historical phenomenon, comprises much more than this experience, which lies at its root." (Scholem 1946, 5).

Idel, on the other hand, argued that a more acute differentiation should be made between theosophical thought, like that found in discursive Kabbalah, which is expressed objectively, and ecstasy, like that found in prophetic Kabbalah, which is more experiential, subjective and non-verbal in character, and which, therefore, is the only one kind that should be termed "mysticism".

R. J. Zvi Werblowsky was the first among Kabbalah scholars to try to solve the perplexity created due to this gap between Scholem's historiosophic definition of mysticism, and the common usage of this term in religious studies. But unlike Idel, Werblowsky attempted, by emphasizing the difference between the non-verbal, subjective element and the theosophical, objective element, to justify Scholem's general usage of the term 'mysticism' as reflecting the whole of the contents of Kabbalah.

Werblowsky argues, following Rudolf Otto's book, *Mysticism East and West* (Otto 1932), for a differentiation between cognitive mysticism, which is a kind of a higher science, formally similar to the normal sciences, and which is discursive, objective and detailed in character, and mysticism, which rejects individual content, both prophetic and cognitive, the official representative of which is Eckhardt. Unlike Otto, Werblowsky offers Saint John of the Cross as a clearer representative of this mysticism, as he rejected any spiritual illumination or occult knowledge as "pseudo-mysticism and the complete opposite to pure spirituality" (Werblowsky 1963/4, 212). On basis of this comparison, Werblowsky claimed that: "Jewish mysticism can serve as an enlightening example of this discursive trend, as its literary creation is mostly theosophical polemics replacing Rabbinical Halakhic polemics. This trend was assisted by the traditional identification of mysticism with prophesy. As prophesy is a matter

of 'clear and distinguishable' contents, the same can be said of all attainments of the Holy Spirit." (Werblowsky 1963/4, 205).

Idel actually rejected Otto's and Werblowsky's approach, which defined discursive theosophies as mystical. In his view, the mystical aspect is the non-discursive aspect of religious life, which seeks contact, and even unification, with God, in an experiential and subjective manner. He called for recognition of the existence of a mystical, experiential and subjective element in Kabbalah, the writings of Abraham Abulafia being one of its prominent sources, which should be essentially differentiated from the discursive, theosophical element. Idel, who based this on his profound knowledge of Abraham Abulafia's writings, reached the conclusion that Abulafia's expressed reservations against the Kabbalah of the Sephirot should not be downplayed. He found that Abulafia's focus on mystical techniques for achieving inner unification of the mind with God was contradictory to the theosophical branch which focused on knowledge of God through the Sephirot system. In fact, it turns out that at the onset of the creation of Kabbalistic traditions in the 13<sup>th</sup> century AD, the different groups were in complete disagreement as to their contents and religious purposes. Idel challenged those denying the existing of Unio Mystica in Judaism, headed by Scholem himself, pointing out that the aspiration to achieve unification with God is a central motive in the prophetic-ecstatic Kabbalah of Abraham Abulafia's school of thought. Despite of the excommunication imposed on Abulafia by Rabbi Shlomo ben Aderet (Rashba), and although his best student, Rabbi Joseph ben Abraham Gikatilla, writer of Sha'are Orah, became a clear representative of the Kabbalah of the Sephirot, Idel argues that Abulafia's writings never ceased being influential, and that this influence clearly spread out in the circle of Safed's Kabbalists, and among the first teachers of Hasidism, who were exposed to Abulafian manuscripts. In this manner he explained the increase in the significance of the experiential-mystical element among these groups, which was not derived from the theosophical materials, but rather from the experiential-mystical elements found in Abulafia's writings. (Idel 1988, 59-73; Idel 1988, ch 1,7; Idel 1995, 45 – 102). In Idel's opinion, throughout the Middle Ages, the various Kabbalistic branches did not work independently from each other, and the Kabbalah of Safed experienced a fertile synthesis of these different branches. In Scholem's studies, and as a consequence, in the studies of most of his students, there is an unbridgeable gap between the theosophical element of Kabbalistic writings, which is deemed by these scholars and objective and worthy, and the ecstatic component which is prominent among some of the Kabbalistic groups, and which reached its pinnacle in early Hasidism, which they deemed subjective and therefore not as worthy.<sup>2</sup> Idel's approach attempts to

2 In the Hebrew edition of his book on Rabbi Yosef Karo, published after Idel's *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, Werblowsky writes: "As Gershom Scholem argues, and this argument is valid, even though some question it: Kabbalah does not aspire for Unio Mystica (which would render the system of erotic imagery in place), but rather aspires for Devekut (devotion)... In more psychological language, it can be said that the

present a more complex description of the world of Kabbalah, as a world which contains theosophical knowledge, which is objective in character, mystical practices, which are subjective in character, and magical techniques. At times, all of these are presented individually, and at times they are integrated. Through this development, Idel advanced Kabbalah studies towards a more complex understanding, which less influenced by unilateral emphasis.

This emphasis is derived, in Idel's view, from the tendency Scholem and his students had to assume what is permitted and what is prohibited in the ideological world of Judaism, first and foremost on the issue of the *Unio Mystica*. In Idel's view, this tendency was strongest among Western-European oriented scholars, who tended to view Kabbalah as a type of philosophy or theology. These scholars ignored the context in which Kabbalah was created and practiced which was not only theoretical discursive, but practical as well.

In my opinion, it is significant that Idel grew up in 1950's north-eastern Romania, on eastern foothills of the Carpathian Mountains, more than 230 years after the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism, grew up in this same area, as related in Hasidic tradition. Obviously, this area has gone through many changes, which certainly affected Jews residing in it after the World War II, but as Idel said more than once in informal circumstances, the manifestations of traditions and customs which survived among Jews in the area, retained something of their past, up to the days of Idel's childhood. These memories, which arose within him more than once when reading Kabbalistic and Hasidic texts, reinforced his understanding that life and writings should not be disconnected, and that when researching, it is necessary to open up to diverse contexts, which can enable us to construct a picture of the past which is truer to the studied reality than that which is created when adhering to principles which are foreign to the studied system. The remnants of magical traditions which he remembered from the environment of his childhood could account for his courage to unbiasedly research the various magical texts which are found in the literature of Kabbalah and Hasidism.

Idel's standpoint brought about harsh criticisms, the harshest of which was that of Isaiah Tishby, the most prominent scholar of Kabbalah among Gershom Scholem's early students. In his criticism, Tishby argued that Idel ignored the fact that in his book *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, he has already mentioned *Unio Mystica* in Kabbalah. Thus Tishby diverted the discussion from the essence of Idel's argument, that much more emphasis should be given to the mystical-experiential elements

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unification, or the *Yehuda Kadisha* (holy union) is found in projection within divinity, rather than in the relationship between the Lord (the divine lover) and man (the loving soul) (Werblowsky 1996, 134). At the same time, in this book, when reviewing the spiritual life of the Kabbalists of Safed, Werblowsky repeats his original statements, writing "the two main goals of these Kabbalists were raising the *Shekinah* from its ashes, and its redemption from exile, as well as unconditional devotion to the Lord, 'unification' with him 'with no boundaries'. This devotion was enabled through the profound understanding that the Kabbalist's heart is the true 'dwelling of the *Shekinah*'" (ibid, 68).

in the entire Kabbalistic-Hasidic body of works. Idel's fundamental argument was that in fact, later writings contained syntheses of ecstatic Kabbalah, characterized by Unio Mystica, and theosophical Kabbalah. The diachronic thought common in the Scholem school of thought emphasized finding the innovation in the chain of Kabbalistic ideas, while Idel expressly adopted Ernst Cassirer's approach, as put forth in his book on the originality of the renaissance. "What we want to know is not the particular idea as such, but the importance it possesses, and the strength with which it is acting in the whole structure. The same ideas are always appearing again and again, and are maintained for centuries... But the historian of ideas is not asking primarily what the substance is of particular ideas. He is asking what their function is. What he is studying - or should be studying - is less the content of ideas than their dynamics." (Kassirer, 55).

Kassirer claimed that the spiritual innovation of a certain period is expressed in the degree of importance given at that period to existing ideas which were previously neglected. The dynamics of the world of thought are of utmost importance in understanding the spiritual difference between periods, as the number of new ideas is limited, and they can usually be found in earlier periods. On the other hand, the inner balance between difference ideas sometimes changes completely from one period to another. Idel's goal was not to discover the first appearance of Unio-Mystica in Kabbalah but how and when it became a crucial element in Kabbalah and Hasidism.

## **Idel and Hasidism**

Idel's phenomenological approach and his argument that the mystical-ecstatic element, mixed in Kabbalistic writings with the theosophical elements, can exist irrespectively and independently from the theosophical element, were found very productive in his studies on Hasidism, the pinnacle of which is his book *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic*.

Free from Scholem's claim that Hasidism is a popularization of Kabbalistic ideas, Idel started researching this world in which, in Scholem's opinion as well, the mystical Jewish experience has reached unprecedented heights.

As mentioned above, Idel's basic position is that Kabbalah should not be approached from perspective of western philosophical, which aspires to expose coherent methods of thought, but rather from an understanding of it being a synthesis of different conceptual, ecstatic and popular elements, based on all Jewish resources preceding them. This approach enabled Idel to propose an innovative view of Hasidism as well.

In the well known polemic between Scholem and Martin Buber regarding the latter's interpretation of Hasidism, Scholem claimed that Buber's interpretation presented Hasidism as a mysticism which aspires to act in this world, while, in his

opinion, the principle goal of the teachers of Hasidism was to retire from world, and negate it. Idel preferred to deal with this issue by enhancing the phenomenological methods he already developed in the past, and by integrating these with more structural thinking, thus bringing about the development of the theory of models he presents in the introduction to his book on Hasidism. (Idel 1995, 49-53, 212). At the basis of each of the models is a different religious ideal, each with its own special terminology. Each model is reproduced through sources which characterize a system of religious concepts, which are interrelated and which interact and create through this interaction spiritual processes which are different from processes created through different systems of concepts. The models are intended to assist in producing an explanation of changes which occurred in Hasidic mysticism, in a manner which is not based on assumptions through historical proximity (Idel 1995, 48). The arguments between Scholem and Buber were to a large extent due to the personal moral belief of each of the two. Scholem, who saw in the mystical experience a subjective, irrational experience, characterized by a desire to be free of this world, tended to reject it. Buber, following Max Weber, differentiated between mysticism which affirms the world and mysticism which negates it. Although the personal changes he went through in the third and fourth decades of his life caused him to have reservations regarding ecstatic-mystical experiences, he attributed great importance to religious experiences in which man meets the world, and considered them experiences of a type which affirms the world and life in it. Idel's theory of models enables us to break free from this polemic between Scholem and Buber, which is undoubtedly affected by their personal standpoints. It moves the discussion away from the question of the connection between mysticism, irrationality and rejection of the world, and puts at the center of discussion the quality of the human interest behind the different aspects of the phenomenon termed by Scholem 'Jewish mysticism'. (Idel 1988, 256-260). Scholem, who argues against the existence of *Unio Mystica* in Judaism, defined devotion, in the sense of an intimate relationship with the divine, as being the center of Hasidism in the first generations of its existence. Idel identified this devotion with *Unio Mystica*, and thus raised the objection of scholar of Hasidism Mendel Piekarcz.

Piekarcz argues decisively against Idel's argument regarding the centrality of the mystical element in early Hasidism. In his opinion, the term devotion may have different meanings, not necessarily mystical ones. Idel agreed with the central argument that the term 'devotion' may have many different meanings, but, on this matter as well, argues against Piekarcz, in the spirit of Kassirer's approach, that the meaning of Hasidic devotion should be determined by exposing the change of emphasis within the entirety of Hasidic thought. (Idel 1995, 212). Finding the roots of 'Hasidic ideas' in the *Mussar* and *Drosh* (Ethical and Homiletical) literature preceding them, which is what Piekarcz specialized in, does not necessarily lead to evidence of the inexistence of a clear mystical aspect in Hasidism. The very fact that with Hasidism came about a surprising change in the number of people devoting

themselves to intensive mystical life, testifies, in Idel's opinion, to the mystical character of this unique phenomenon. Idel's openness to the examination of the similarity between Hasidic mysticism and the mysticism existing in the Christian world in whose surroundings Hasidism was born, supported his fundamental arguments. Idel insisted, for example, on the great similarity between the Baal Shem Tov's description of the ascent of the soul, and the ascent of the soul described by Eliade in his work *Zalmoxis*, according to the letter sent by Archbishop Marcus Bandinus to the Pope, Innocent X, dated 1648, in which he summarizes his visits to the villages of Moldavia at that period (Eliade 1972, 191-194; Idel 2005, 149). The recognition of the similarities between Eastern European mystical worlds and the mystical world of Hasidism is another mean used by Idel to establish an open, fresh approach to the study of Eastern European Jewish mysticism.

However, Idel's central claim regarding the character of Hasidism is related to his perception of an emphasis given to a new factor, which led to the conception of mystical life as a mean to benefit others, rather than the final personal goal of the mystic. In Idel's opinion, the meaning of devotion in pure mystical conception is different from its meaning in an approach integrating mysticism and magic out of an anthropocentric altruistic perception, like that of Hasidism.

### **The Study of Jewish Magic**

Idel presents the system of inter-relations between magical and mystical elements in the world of Hasidism, as a crucial basis for understanding its spiritual quality. He bases this on the relations between Hasidism and ecstatic Kabbalah, and the magical perceptions which were widespread in general Jewish thought and in Kabbalistic thought in the Middle Ages, aspects usually neglected in Scholem's studies of the Kabbalah, as well as in the studies of many of his students.

Even in *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, Idel deduces, on basis of the phenomenological similarity between Hasidism and Ecstatic Kabbalah, that they are both anthropocentric in character. (Idel 1988, xvi-xvii). "When a certain mystical system focuses on inner experiences more than on theurgical activity, the entities to be activated are no longer the objectivity existing divine Sefirot but rather the human spiritual Sefirot". (Idel 1988, 146 – 153).

In his discussion on the similarities between the mystical-ecstatic model and the magical model, which he claims were joined in Hasidism as a unified integrative model, Idel states: "Both of these models are strongly anthropocentric: man is the center of activity as well as the main beneficiary of the results of these activities. In a more detailed manner, we may also describe man as the place where the encounter with the divine takes place: not a sacred place, a shrine or a temple, but the human person hosts this contact" (Idel 1995, 82).

To understand the mystic's interest in affecting the outside world and human activity in it, Idel employs Jungian psychologist Erich Neumann's description of the mystical man, in which he is described as a person who aspires, when returning to worldly life, to transform the world by expanding consciousness through his mystical experience. (Neumann 1982). "Thus, we may characterize Jewish mysticism as a "world-Transforming mysticism" (to use again Neumann's phrase), even in those cases when extreme unifying expressions are to be found, including the consummation imagery of the Habad school. No mention of the dissolution of the mystical core of the personality is to be found." (Idel 1996, 27 – 57).

Understanding the quality of the innovation found in Hasidism requires us to reveal the integrative, mystical-magical model which characterizes Hasidism. "However while ecstatic and theosophical-theurgical Kabbalah focus their efforts on transcending mundane conditions and needs in favor of trans-natural aims – total spiritualization in the case of ecstatic Kabbalah and repairing the inner structures of divinity in the theurgical-theosophical Kabbalah – both ideals have become directly instrumental in Hasidism in the improvement of the life of the group. This shift of the focus of religious interest from the theocentric and anthropocentric toward an anthropocentric type of experience that serves, in many cases, a more altruistic way of life, is crucial for the understanding of this distinct type of religious mentality." (Idel 1995, 210).

Idel argues that the premises in the study of Hasidism, shared by Buber and Scholem, despite of the fundamental differences between them, essentially restricted the horizons of Hasidic studies in the twentieth century. Contrary to their approaches, each of which focused on only one aspect of the Hasidic experience, Idel turned to what he termed a panoramic approach. (Idel 1995, 2 – 15). It could be said that paradoxically, this approach, which enables presentation of the uniqueness of Hasidism through the magical-mystical model, cast additional doubt over the decisiveness of Scholem's views in his polemic with Buber. It is precisely Idel's research, which dealt with Hasidism without depending on the terms commonly used in the discussion, which raised renewed doubt over the presentation of the issue by Scholem and his students; Buber's arguments regarding Hasidism bridging between the divine and the human and worldly were revalidated. The argument made by Scholem and some of his students, that the first teachers of Hasidism were mystics, to whom real interest in this world and in matters of society cannot be attributed, contradicts, in light of Idel's new perspective, the image arising from Hasidic texts. It is in fact Buber, although he tried to diminish the importance of magic in Hasidism, who indirectly recognized the implications of the magical aspect on the spiritual world of the Hasidim. Unlike him, Scholem and some of his followers recognized the magical activity of the Baal Shem Tov (Scholem 1982), yet ignored the implications of the integration of the mystical interest with the magical interest on the understanding of the unique spiritual world of Hasidism. The magical-mystical model presented by Idel enables us to view Hasidic mysticism as a mystical model intended to bridge the divine and the worldly.

Idel's studies open new horizons in the studies of Kabbalah and Hasidism for younger scholars. The integration of phenomenological and structuralist methods, which use basic concepts from religious studies, supplied new tools for the study of Kabbalistic-Hasidic literature, and for understanding its mystical-experiential quality, together with other elements which characterize it. This usage also raises new disagreements regarding the advantages and disadvantages of using external terms for explaining a spiritual world these terms are not an integral part of. Freedom from authoritative approaches in regard to previous studies and previous views, even if those are based on solid opinions and scientific theories about the object of study; genuine openness to new fields of study, and general religious and mystical studies; and placing phenomenological thought at the center of the study of the religious phenomenon, are the key principles in Moshe Idel's scientific work, which are willingly adopted by his students and readers.

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# ADAM AFTERMAN

## Letter Permutation Techniques, Kavannah and Prayer in Jewish Mysticism

### Abstract:

The article presents an analysis of a mystical practice of letter permutation conceived as part of the practice of “kavannah” in prayer. This practice was articulated by a 13<sup>th</sup> century anonymous ecstatic kabbalist writing in Catalonia. The anonymous author draws on earlier sources in the kabbalah and Ashkenazi spirituality. The article explores the wider connection between ecstasy and ritual, particularly prayer in the earlier stages of Judaism and its development in medieval theology and kabbalah. The anonymous author describes a unique permutation technique capable of inducing ecstatic experiences as part of the liturgical ritual.

Moshe Idel has written at length on many topics on the history of Jewish Mysticism and *Kabbalah*<sup>1</sup>. In this article, I will focus on two subjects that have received his special attention in numerous studies. The first one is the study of mystical technique and mystical experience in general and their relation to traditional Jewish prayer and liturgical ritual in particular.<sup>2</sup> The second is the analysis of mystical and ecstatic

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1 This study in Ecstatic Kabbalah is presented to my teacher Professor Moshe Idel in gratitude for his scholarship and generosity.

2 Moshe Idel, 'Kabbalistic Prayer and Colors', *Approaches to Judaism in Medieval Times*, Vol. III, ed. D. Blumenthal, Atlanta 1988, pp. 17-27; Moshe Idel, 'Some Remarks on Ritual and Mysticism in Geronese Kabbalah', *Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 3 (1993), pp. 111-130; Moshe Idel, 'On R. Issac Sagi Nahor's Mystical Intention of the Eighteen Benedictions', *Massu'ot*, *Studies in Kabbalistic Literature and Jewish Philosophy in Memory of Prof. Ephraim Gottlieb*, eds. M. Oron and A. Goldreich, Jerusalem 1994, pp. 25-52 (Hebrew); Moshe Idel, 'Prayer in Provence Kabbalah', *Likkutei Tarbiz* 6 (2003), pp. 421-442 (Hebrew); Moshe Idel, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*; Moshe Idel, *Golem: Jewish Magical and Mystical Traditions on the Artificial Anthropoid*, Albany 1990; Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah and Eros*, New Haven & London 2005, pp. 22-44; Moshe Idel, *Absorbing Perfections: Kabbalah and Interpretation*, New Haven and London 2002, pp. 352-389; Moshe Idel, *Enchanted*

models in the history of Jewish Mysticism and particularly Ecstatic Kabbalah.<sup>3</sup> In what follows, these two areas will be discussed and explored, as will the nexus between liturgical practice and ecstatic experience.

In fact, that nexus is quite broad. Despite some important exceptions, these two subjects have been historically interconnected. That is to say the methods used by most Jewish mystics in their attempts to achieve ecstatic experience were tied into traditional Jewish practices: the performance of the *mitzvot* (commandments) in general and liturgical prayer and the study of Torah in particular.<sup>4</sup>

One of the outstanding exceptions to this rule is the 13<sup>th</sup> Century ecstatic kabbalist, Abraham Abulafia. Abulafia's brand of Ecstatic Kabbalah incorporated techniques and ecstatic experiences that Moshe Idel defines as essentially detached from the performance of the commandments and from the act of liturgical prayer.<sup>5</sup> In Idel's eyes, Abulafia's techniques and experiences are 'a-nomian' in character, meaning that his mystical techniques, which involved permutations of letters and holy names, were not designed to accompany any particular commandment or ritual. A different view has been expressed by Elliot Wolfson, who has argued that *halakhic* practices are in fact an essential component of Abulafia's mystical techniques. Furthermore, Wolfson claims that in the Jewish world of the 13<sup>th</sup> century it did not exist any notion of an 'a-nomian' Jewish spirituality. In Wolfson's view, Abulafia's techniques and experiences should be classified as 'hypernomian' rather than 'a-nomian'.<sup>6</sup> Idel has defended his own position on several occasions, in particular focusing on prayer and on the performance of commandments such as the donning of *tefillin* (phylacteries) in Abulafia's Kabbalah.<sup>7</sup>

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*Chains: Techniques and Rituals In Jewish Mysticism*, Los Angeles 2005. Moshe Idel, *Ascensions on High in Jewish Mysticism: Pillars, Lines, Ladders*, Budapest 2005.

- 3 Moshe Idel, *Abraham Abulafia's Works and Doctrine* (PhD Diss, Jerusalem, 1976) (Hebrew); Moshe Idel, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, Albany 1988; Moshe Idel, *Language, Torah and Hermeneutics in Abraham Abulafia*, Albany 1989; Moshe Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, Albany 1988; Moshe Idel, *Le Porte Della Giustizia Saare Sadeq*, Milano 2001; Moshe Idel, 'Abraham Abulafia and Unio Mystica', *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature*, Vol. 3, edited by I. Twersky and J. M. Harris, Cambridge 2000, pp. 147-178; Moshe Idel, *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic*, Albany 1995.
- 4 See Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, New Haven and London 1988, pp. 267-271; Moshe Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, pp. 218-219; Moshe Idel, 'The Qedushah and the Observation of the Heavenly Chariot', *From Qumran to Cairo: Studies in the History of Prayer*, edited by J. Tabory, Jerusalem 1999, pp. 7-15 (Hebrew).
- 5 See Moshe Idel, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, New York 1988, pp. 8-9; Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, pp. 74-75, 97-102; Moshe Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, New York 1988, p. 18.
- 6 See, Elliot Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia-Kabbalist and Prophet: Hermeneutics, Theosophy and Theurgy*, Los Angeles 2000, pp. 178-228. For his discussion on Abulafia's letter permutation techniques, see pp. 197-205. For his definition of the term 'hypernomian' see p. 209.
- 7 See, Moshe Idel, *Le Porte Della Giustizia Saare Sadeq*, pp. 147-163; Moshe Idel, 'The Kabbalistic Interpretation of the secret of Arayyot in early Kabbalah', *Kabbalah* 12 (2004) (Hebrew), pp. 157-159, 180-184. For Abulafia's view on *Tefillin*, see Wolfson, *Abulafia*, pp. 191-195, 209-210, and cf. Moshe Idel, 'On the meaning of the term Kabbalah- between the Ecstatic and the Sefirotic schools of Kabbalah in the 13<sup>th</sup> Century', *Peamim* 93 (2003) (Hebrew), p. 51; Moshe Idel, 'The Kabbalistic Interpretation of the secret of Arayyot in early Kabbalah', p. 159; Moshe Idel, *Le Porte Della Giustizia Saare Sadeq*, p. 296.

Leaving aside the dispute about Abulafia's relationship to the commandments, in the following I will concentrate on the nexus between ecstatic religious experience and ritual practice by analyzing the role played by the notion of kavannah<sup>8</sup> in the performance of liturgical prayer and blessings. In particular, I will focus on a technique of letter permutation designed to produce ecstatic experiences as described in the writings of a 13<sup>th</sup> Century anonymous kabbalist who wrote an enigmatic commentary on the prayers and the benedictions.<sup>9</sup> I have published a comprehensive analysis and a critical edition of this commentary<sup>10</sup> in which I conclude that the anonymous author wrote the commentary in the years 1260-1270 in Catalonia.<sup>11</sup> Written

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- 8 The Hebrew term kavannah can loosely be translated as 'intention', though the way the term was understood has differed meanings in different historical periods and amongst different groups. The meanings of the word kavannah will be returned to later in this article.
- 9 See, Moshe Idel, *Abraham Abulafia's Works and Doctrine*, pp. 77-78, 84; Moshe Idel, 'Ramon Lull and Ecstatic Kabbalah', *Journal of the Warburg and the Courtauld Institutes* 51 (1988), pp. 170-174; Moshe Idel, *Hasidism*, pp. 156, 339 and note 50; Moshe Idel, *R. Menachem Recanati the Kabbalist*, Vol 1, Tel Aviv 1998, (Hebrew), pp. 111-113. Moshe Idel, *Le Porte Della Giustizia Saare Sedeq*, p. 148; Moshe Idel, 'Ashkenazi Esotericism and Kabbalah in Barcelona', *Hispania Judaica* 5 (2007), p. 104; Gershom Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, translated by A. Arkush and edited by R. J. Werblowsky, New Jersey 1987, p. 345, note 291; Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah*, Jerusalem 1974, p. 179.
- 10 Adam Afterman, *The Intention of Prayers in Early Ecstatic Kabbalah: a Study and Critical Edition of an Anonymous Commentary to the Prayers*, Los Angeles 2004 (Hebrew). Cf. Saverio Campanini, 'Yehudah ben Nissim Ibn Malka: Perush Ha-Tefelot', (Appendix) in: Giulio Busi, *Catalogue of the Kabbalistic Manuscripts in the Library of the Jewish Community of Mantua*, Firenze 2001. See also the partial publication of the first part of the commentary by Abraham Joshua Heschel, 'Perus al Tefillot', L. Ginzberg & A. Weiss (eds.), *Studies in Memory of Moses Schorr*, New York 1945, pp. 113-126.
- 11 Cf. Saverio Campanini and Giulio Busi's claim that the commentary was written by Yehuda Ibn Malka in Campanini, *Perush ha-Tefelot*, pp. 219-241; and see my set of objections to that claim: Afterman, *The Intention of Prayers*, pp. 23-34. See also, Moshe Idel, 'Reflections on Kabbalah in Spain and Christian Kabbalah', *Hispania Judaica* 2 (1999), p. 8; Moshe Idel, *Hasidism*, p. 339 n. 50; Moshe Hallamish, 'Leyla Mikol Birchata – Towards a History of the Hebrew Version', *Kenishta: Studies of the Synagogue World*, Edited by J. Tabor, Ramat Gan 2007, pp. 87-88 and note 18 (Hebrew); and Giulio Busi, *Qabbalah Visiva*, Torino 2005, p. 137 notes 266, 268, where he claims that I chose for my edition of the anonymous commentary the worst manuscript without providing any account. Despite his claim, any reader can find a detailed account of the long process of evaluation of different manuscripts (Afterman, *The Intention of Prayers*, pp. 199-205) including justification for my choice of MS London, British Library, Add 27009 (Margoliouth 751), from the larger family of manuscripts, as the manuscript to publish. Regarding the British Library MS that Busi himself wrote elsewhere in his edition (p. 241) : "the text that we [Campanini & Busi] consider for the most reliable version of the larger family [is] Ms. London, British library, Add 27009 (Margoliouth 751)". The same MS was used by Busi himself as the main MS for his apparatus, and was apparently at the time considered by Busi to be "the most reliable version of the larger family". I consider the larger family to be on the whole a more reliable set of versions of the commentary I chose to publish the British Library MS 27009, the most reliable within this group. Interestingly, although Busi and Campanini do explain their reasons for choosing the smaller family of MSS they do not provide an explanation for their choice of the Mantua MS from within the small family. I, for instance, preferred a different MS from the small family for my apparatus. Regarding my objection to the identification of Ibn Malka as the author of the Commentary (Afterman, pp. 23-34) and to the identification of one of Ibn Malka's books as the lost Commentary on Pirkie De Rabi Elezar (Afterman, pp. 27-28), Busi prefers to attack me ad hominem rather than to address my arguments. See, moreover, Campanini and Busi's claim that the alleged author Ibn Malka was the first author to quote from the Zohar in Campanini, 'Perush Ha-tefelot', pp. 231-232, 308. Cf. Afterman, *The Intention of Prayers*, p. 28. See also the evidence analyzed by Moshe Idel suggesting that Ibn Malka did not live after the middle of the 13<sup>th</sup> century in Moshe Idel, 'The Beginning of Kabbalah in North Africa? – A forgotten document by R. Yehuda ben Nissim ibn Malka', *Peamim* 43 (1990) (Hebrew), pp. 4-15. Busi's and Campanini's attempt to identify the anonymous author with Ibn Malka leads, in their words, to 'annoying circularity' (p.

before or parallel to the time that Abraham Abulafia began his writing career, the Anonymous Commentary to the Prayers shows many similarities to the Ecstatic Kabbalah espoused by Abulafia, and I consider it part of the earlier stages of Ecstatic Kabbalah in Spain.<sup>12</sup>

The anonymous author of the Commentary was apparently a member of a group of ecstatic kabbalists who studied Linguistic Kabbalah and various commentaries to *Sefer Yetzirah* (Book of Creation) that were available at that time in Barcelona.<sup>13</sup> Three prominent members of this circle of ecstatic kabbalists are known of at this stage: Baruch Togarmi, who wrote an enigmatic commentary on *Sefer Yetzirah*; Abraham Abulafia, who testified that he visited Barcelona in the year 1270 and intensively studied Linguistic Kabbalah and commentaries on *Sefer Yetzirah* while there; and Yosef Gikatilla, a young student of Abulafia.<sup>14</sup> The anonymous writer of the Commentary to the Prayers should be situated within this context. At this time, in Barcelona he may have been exposed to Linguistic and Ecstatic Kabbalah, to Ashkenazi Esotericism, and also to Jewish Theology.<sup>15</sup> Moshe Idel has suggested that the neglected commentary had some influence on Christian mysticism, in particular on Ramon Lull<sup>16</sup> and later on Pico Morandola.<sup>17</sup> a recently discovered and published partial Latin translation of the Commentary that was prepared for Giovanni Pico, Count of Morandola seems to support Idel's contention.<sup>18</sup> In order to provide the relevant background for my analysis of the unique nexus between the mystical technique of 'letter permutations' and *kavannah* in prayer and blessing in the Anonymous Commentary, I will first present a survey of the nexus between prayer and ecstatic and mystical experience in Jewish Mysticism and Jewish Theology prior to the development of Ecstatic Kabbalah in 13<sup>th</sup> century Spain.

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223). See my detailed analysis of the problems involved in this identification in Afterman, *The Intention of Prayers*, pp. 23-34.

- 12 See Afterman, *The Intention of Prayers*, pp. 16-23; Moshe Idel, 'Ashkenazi Esotericism', p. 104.
- 13 On this group of ecstatic kabbalists active in Barcelona see, Moshe Idel, 'The Vicissitudes of Kabbalah in Catalonia', *The Jews of Spain and the Expulsion of 1492*, ed. M. Lazar, Los Angeles 1997, pp. 31-35; Idel, 'Ashkenazi Esotericism', pp. 69-70, 103-104; Haviva Pedaya, *Vision and Speech: Models of Revelatory Experience in Jewish Mysticism*, Los Angeles 2001, (Hebrew), pp. 193-194; Afterman, *The Intention of Prayers*, pp. 17-18.
- 14 See Idel, *R. Menachem Recanati*, pp. 33-35.
- 15 See Idel, 'Ashkenazi Esotericism'. See Afterman, *The Intention of Prayers*, pp. 17-19
- 16 Idel, 'Ramon Lull', pp. 170-171; Moshe Idel, 'Dignitates and Kavod: Two Theological Concepts in Catalan Mysticism', *Studia Luliana* 36 (1997), pp. 69-78; Harvey J. Hames, *The Art of Conversion: Christianity and Kabbalah in the Thirteenth Century*, Leiden 2000, pp. 135-136; Afterman, *The Intention of Prayers*, pp. 132-133.
- 17 Idel, 'Ramon Lull', p. 170 note 6, 171-172; Idel, 'Reflection on Kabbalah in Spain and Christian Kabbalah', *Hispania Judaica Bulletin* 2 (1999), p. 12.
- 18 See, Saverio Campanini, 'Perush Ha-Tefilot', pp. 233-238.

## I: Kavannah in Early Rabbinic Sources

The nexus between Jewish liturgical prayer and mystical practice has its roots in ancient Jewish Mysticism. The link between prayer and pre-kabbalistic 'Merkavah Mysticism' is well established.<sup>19</sup> In contrast, early rabbinic sources do not elaborate on mystical dimensions to the performance of the act of the prayer.<sup>20</sup> Whilst rabbinic sources do discuss a requirement that an individual must have *kavannah* ('intention') in order to partake in liturgical prayer, it remains unclear what kind of intention is meant by this term.<sup>21</sup> The Tosefta, for instance, states that "One must pray with the intention of the heart (*kavannath ha-lev*)", but provides no further explanation as to what that means.<sup>22</sup> Other sources seem to relate to *kavannah* in prayer as a focusing of the imagination or of some other mental capacity on the *Axis Mundi* situated between the physical Temple in Jerusalem and the 'celestial Temple'.<sup>23</sup>

Shlomo Naeh has demonstrated how some of the *Tannaim* attempted to reconstruct institutionalized communal prayer by instituting a hierarchy that distinguishes between 'ecstatic prayer' and 'regular prayer'.<sup>24</sup> The ecstatic kind of prayer was differentiable in its external form from the 'regular' prayer. Some of the *Tannaim* distinguished between a 'regular' prayer, which requires some kind of intention or *kavannah*, on the one hand, and a type of ecstatic prayer that possesses a man and takes control of his speech, on the other. The line was drawn, in other words, between the prayer of the heart and the prayer of the ecstatic tongue.<sup>25</sup>

19 Alexander Altmann, *Faces of Judaism: Selected Essays*, Tel Aviv 1983, pp. 44-67 (Hebrew); Michael Swartz, *Mystical Prayer in Ancient Judaism*, Teubingen 1992; Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, New York 1954, pp. 57-63; Gershom Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkavah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition*, New York 1965, pp. 9-30, 101-117; Elliot Wolfson, *Through a Speculum that Shines*, pp. 98-105; Philp Alexander, 'Prayer in the Heikhalot Literature', *Priere Mystique at Judaisme*, ed. R. Goetschel, Paris 1987, pp. 43-64; Moshe Idel, 'The Qedushah and the Observation of the Heavenly Chariot', pp. 7-15; Peter Schaefer, *The Hidden and Manifest God*, p. 165; Adam Afterman, 'Ma'aseh Merkava in Rabbinic Literature: Prayer and Envisioning the Chariot', *Kabbalah* 13 (2005), pp. 253-255 and notes 15-17 (Hebrew); Rachel Elijor, 'Mysticism, Magic and Angelology - The Perception of Angels in Hekhalot Literature', *JSQ* 1 (1993\1994), pp. 43-51; Rachel Elijor, 'From earthly Temple to heavenly shrines: prayer and sacred song in the Hekhalot literature and its relation to Temple traditions', *JSQ* 4 (1997), pp. 217-267.

20 See Menachem Lorberbaum, *A Theoretical Analysis of the Rabbinic Notion of Kavannah in the Commandments*, M.A thesis, Hebrew University 1988 (Hebrew); Ephraim E. Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs*, Jerusalem 1998 (Hebrew), pp. 45-46, 344-347. Garb, *The Manifestations of Power*, pp. 34-35. Cf. Elliot Wolfson, 'Iconic Visualization and the Imaginal Body of God: The Role of Intention in the Rabbinic Conception of Prayer', *Modern Theology* 12 (1996), pp. 137-178. Cf. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Theology of Ancient Judaism*, Volume one, London & New York 1962, pp. 153-169 (Hebrew).

21 See, Ephraim Urbach, *The Sages*, p. 345. Mishna Berakhoth, 5, 1; Tosefta Berakhoth, 3, 4.

22 Tosefta Berakhoth, 3, 4; 2, 2.

23 See Saul Lieberman, *Tosefta ki-Fshutah*, vol 1, Jerusalem 1992, (Hebrew), pp. 43-44 and note 65; Ephraim Urbach, *The Sages*, p. 45; Uri Erlich, *Studies in Jewish Liturgy: a Reader*, selected by H. Mack (Likkurei Tarbiz VI), Jerusalem 2003, pp. 477-491. (Hebrew); Wolfson, 'Iconic Visualization'.

24 Shlomo Naeh, "Creates the Fruit of Lips": a Phenomenological Study of Prayer According to Mishna Berakot 4:3, 5:5; Tarbiz 63 (1994) (Hebrew), p. 210-212.

25 Naeh, 'Creates', p. 193.

Naeh concludes that some of the *Tannaim* conceived of institutionalized prayer as being based on the phenomenon of ecstatic prayer as practiced by the *Hasidim Ha-Rishonim* ('Early Pious Ones'). This group, described in some of the sources as having engaged in intense ecstatic modes of prayer, seems to have focused not on conscious intentions of the heart, but rather on ecstatic techniques. Later, Talmudic sources, basing themselves on alternative descriptions of the *Hasidim Ha-Rishonim*, tended to prefer the 'regular' prayer with its requirement of conscious intention of the heart.<sup>26</sup> In other early rabbinic sources that discuss the need for a mental component to accompany the physical performance of commandments, even in the cases where such a component is deemed necessary, it rarely if ever has any mystical content.<sup>27</sup>

Despite the absence of contemplative or mystical content to the notion of *kavannah* in the performance of the commandments or in the act of prayer, one can find in the rabbinic literature a theurgist understanding of *halakhic* practice.<sup>28</sup> In the theurgist strands of the literature, the power relationship between human beings and God is tied to the theomorphic human body.<sup>29</sup> In other words, the effect of a specific ritual or mitzvah is based not on mental intention or *kavannah*, nor on any contemplative, noetic or spiritual union with the divine, but rather on the corporal, somatic performance of the commandment itself.<sup>30</sup>

In a recent article, I explored a possible connection in rabbinic literature between liturgical prayer and a mystical practice that involved a contemplative envisioning of the *Merkavah*' in the heart.<sup>31</sup> I found a connection between the *Kedusha* (sanctum) sections that were incorporated into the Jewish institutionalized communal prayer, and a practice of envisioning *Merkavah* content during the recitation of the daily prayer. The content that is envisioned is alluded to in the *Kedusha* sections themselves and appears in sources known as *Ma'aseh Merkavah* texts or prayers.<sup>32</sup>

26 Naeh, 'Creates', p. 218.

27 See, I. Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, Volume Two, Jerusalem 1982, pp. 247-248 (Hebrew); Ron Margolin, *The Interiorization of Religious Life and Thought at the Beginning of Hasidism: Its Sources and Epistemological Basis*, PhD Dissertation, Jerusalem 1999 (Hebrew), pp. 91-95; Jonathan Garb, *Manifestations of Power in Jewish Mysticism: From Rabbinic Literature to Safedian Kabbalah*, Jerusalem 2005 (Hebrew), pp. 28-46.

28 Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, New Haven and London 1988, pp. 156-199; Idel, *Enchanted Chains*, pp. 165-168; Jonathan Garb, *Manifestations of Power*, pp. 28-46; Jonathan Garb, 'Kinds of Power: Rabbinic texts and the Kabbalah', *Kabbalah* 6 (2001), pp. 45-71.

29 Yair Lorberbaum, *Image of God: Halakhah and Aggadah*, Tel Aviv 2004 (Hebrew).

30 See Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah and Eros*, pp. 22-35.

31 Adam Afterman, 'Ma'aseh Merkava in Rabbinic Literature: Prayer and Envisioning the Chariot', *Kabbalah* 13 (2005), pp. 249-269 (Hebrew); Daniel Abrams, 'A neglected Talmudic reference to Maase Merkava', *Frankfurter Judaistische Beiträge* 26 (1999), pp. 1-5.

32 See Ezra Fleischer in *Likkutei Tarbiz* 6 (2003), pp. 210-213, 301-350 (Hebrew); Moshe Weinfeld, *Early Jewish Liturgy: From Psalms to the Prayers in Qumran and Rabbinic Literature*, Jerusalem 2004, (Hebrew), pp. 167-178, 228-235; Altmann, *Faces of Judaism*, pp. 44-51; Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkavah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition*, pp. 101-117; Daniel Abrams, 'Ma'aseh Merkavah' as a literary work: the reception of Hekhalot traditions by the German Pietists and kabbalistic reinterpretation', *Jewish Studies Quarterly*, 5,4 (1998), pp. 329-345.

These rabbinic discussions, which refer to *'Uvanta De-Liba'* ('comprehension/perception of the heart'), are exceptional and were later used by medieval rabbinic authorities as sources on which to ground their revolutionary internalizing of the practices of prophecy, visionary mysticism and prayer.<sup>33</sup>

## II: The Emergence of Mystical Understandings of Prayer in the Medieval Period

In the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> century, rabbinic authorities began reflecting more systematically on the vast rabbinic and mystical literature as part of an attempt to offer a comprehensive outlook on the theological and spiritual aspects of the Jewish tradition.<sup>34</sup> Using philosophical insights, categories and structures, the Jewish esoteric tradition was reconstructed in a creative outburst that lasted for centuries. The absorption of psychological and epistemological concepts led to an internalization of the institutions of prophecy and visionary mysticism and of parts of *halakhic* practice.<sup>35</sup>

a few rabbinical statements alluding to *'Uvanta De-Liba'* mentioned above<sup>36</sup> and theological insights were used and enhanced by Rav Hai Gaon and some followers in the eleventh and twelfth centuries in Italy and Ashkenaz to articulate and develop a rationalist introverted interpretation of visionary mysticism relating to visionary prophecy and mystical technique.<sup>37</sup> The public domain which was the locus of religious performance now came to be accompanied by a mental, imaginative, or spiritual realm internal and to some extent private to man. The formation of a mental medium allowed for the development of advanced techniques of mental concentration that later evolved into the *kavannah* techniques of early Kabbalah.

Several ideas influenced the particular understanding of the notion of *kavannah* that emerged by the 13<sup>th</sup> Century in kabbalistic circles. One idea that affected this new understanding was a distinction that was created by theologians including

33 Wolfson, *Through a Speculum that Shines*, pp. 109-119, 144-160; Ron Margolin, *The Interiorization of Religious Life and Thought*, pp. 176-179, 196-200; Adam Afterman, 'Ma'aseh Merkava', pp. 249-252; Moshe Idel, *Ascensions on High*, pp. 32-54; Moshe Idel, 'From Italy to Ashkenaz and back : On the circulation of Jewish mystical traditions', *Kabbalah* 14 (2006) pp. 48-58, 94.

34 See, *The Philosophy of Judaism: The history of Jewish philosophy from Biblical times to Franz Rosenzweig* by Julius Guttman, translated by David W. Silverman, New Jersey 1988; Alexander Altmann and S. M. Stern, *Isaac Israeli: a Neoplatonic Philosopher of the Early Tenth Century. His Works Translated with Comments and Outline of his Philosophy*, Oxford University Press 1958.

35 See Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, pp. 90-91; Idel, *Ascensions on High*, pp. 28-36; (Hebrew); Afterman, 'Maaseh Merkava'; Ron Margolin, *The Interiorization of Religious Life ad Thought*, pp. 80-210.

36 Afterman, 'Maase Merkava'.

37 See, Moshe Idel, 'From Italy to Ashkenaz and back', and Moshe Idel, 'To the Metamorphoses of an ancient technique for prophetic Vision in the middle Ages', *Sinai* 86 (1980), pp. 1-7 (Hebrew).

Bahya ibn Paquda and Abraham ibn Ezra between what came to be known as ‘commandments of the heart’ and the rest of the mitzvot. This *halakhic* category was understood as involving spiritual and mystical transformations, which would take place ‘in the heart.’ a second source of influence came from the traditional rabbinic description of prayer as *avodath ha-lev* (‘worship of the heart’).<sup>38</sup> This appellation understandably led to prayer being viewed as the proper context during regular, day-to-day life for the implementation of the transformative notions infused into the ‘commandments of the heart.’ The designation of ‘commandments of the heart’ as a separate category of *mitzvot* and the understanding that these commandments have spiritual and contemplative content was thus combined with a classic rabbinic understanding of prayer as ‘worship of the heart’ and as conditioned on intention of the heart.<sup>39</sup> The creation of an inner space—imagination or ‘the heart’—based on the notion of ‘*Uvanta De-Liba*’ (perception of the heart) was combined with the category of the ‘commandments of the heart’ and with the notion of ‘worship of the heart.’ Gradually, this led to the defining of this inner space as the locus of mystical and liturgical worship.<sup>40</sup>

For instance, an example of this pre-kabbalistic tendency can be found in the ideas of Maimonides who demanded from the contemplative and enlightened elite the splitting of one’s consciousness, one part engaging in mundane affairs while the other concentrating on the divine.<sup>41</sup> Whilst engaged in ceremonies and ritual or whilst acting in the public sphere, the elite are required, according to Maimonides, to concentrate their thought on God gradually establishing a constant mental connection with the divine. An earlier example can be found in the thought of Bahya ibn Paquda. Ibn Paquda’s celebrated book, *Hovoth Ha-Levavoth* (‘Duties of the Heart’) represents an attempt to view *Halakhah* as an instrument for the fulfillment of particular spiritual and mystical goals, some which derive from Sufi sources. The ‘commandments of the heart’, such as the commandment to love God and to cleave to him, were interpreted by Ibn Paquda as commandments for the highest transformation of one’s being, mind, and heart.<sup>42</sup> This transformation was conceived by Ibn Paquda not only as an integral part of *halakhic* practice but

38 See Sifre on Deuteronomy, Finkelstein Edition, New York and Jerusalem 2001, section 41, p. 88; Wolfson, *Through the Speculum that Shines*, pp. 290-291.

39 See, Tosefta Brachot, chapter 3, 6.

40 See Elliot Wolfson, *Through the Speculum that Shines*, pp. 125-187.

41 See, Aviezer Ravitzky, *Maimonidean Essays*, Tel Aviv 2006, (Hebrew) pp. 42-58; David Blumenthal, ‘Maimonides: Prayer, Worship and Mysticism’, in: *Priere, Mystique et Judaïsme*, ed. R. Goetschel, Paris 1984, p. 9; Lawrence Kaplan, ‘“I Sleep but my Heart Waketh”: Maimonides’ Conception of Human Perfection’, *The Thought of Moses Maimonides: Philosophical and Legal Studies*, eds. I. Robinson, L. Kaplan and J. Bauer, Lampeter 1990, pp. 163-164.

42 See Diana Lobel, *A Sufi-Jewish Dialogue: Philosophy and Mysticism in Bahya Ibn Paquda’s Duties of the Heart*, Philadelphia 2007, pp. 177-242; Sara Svirin, ‘Spiritual Trends in Pre-Kabbalistic Judeo-Spanish Literature: the Case of Bahya ibn Paquda and Judah Halevi’, *Donaire* 6 (1996), pp. 78-84; Aharon Mirsky, *From the Duties of the Heart to Songs of the Heart: Jewish Philosophy and Ethics and their influence on Hebrew Poetry in Medieval Spain*, Jerusalem 1992, pp. 288-299 (Hebrew).

as its ultimate goal, meaning that all other norms were but means leading the enlightened individual towards the highest and most final goal, namely a pure, mystical love of God that was conceived of as a mystical union with the 'divine light'.<sup>43</sup>

At this stage, one can find a tendency to associate the cleaving to God that is implied in the spiritual interpretation of the 'commandments of the heart' with the act of prayer and liturgical worship. Institutionalized prayer, in other words, came to be viewed as the time and place to realize one's 'inner', spiritual duties.<sup>44</sup> Idel writes of the theologians that were active prior to the Kabbalah that they had a vision of prayer "as a moment of recollection, of contemplation, of search for an apprehension of the divine, or even a mystical union. The medieval Jewish philosophers were above all concerned with the intellectual or inner prayer..."<sup>45</sup> The creation of the category known as 'commandments of the heart' allowed Ibn Paquda to insert Sufi mystical content into Jewish religious practice using a powerful *halakhic* category that would be influential in later developments in Jewish theology. Ibn Paquda's innovation allowed, for example, theologians such as Abraham ibn Ezra<sup>46</sup> and Maimonides to fuse into the 'worship of the heart' their own perceptions of the final and most advanced forms of worship.<sup>47</sup> Despite the fact that Ibn Paquda's book was translated into Hebrew for the first family of kabbalists in Provence, there exists no unequivocal evidence that his writings influenced the Kabbalah of the 13<sup>th</sup> Century.<sup>48</sup> Nevertheless, the idea that the 'commandments of the heart' are related to spiritual and mystical transformation did find its articulation in 12<sup>th</sup> Century Jewish Theology and later also in early Kabbalah.<sup>49</sup>

Prayer was conceived by some 12<sup>th</sup> century Jewish thinkers as the proper moment to achieve concentration of thought, various kinds of contemplative concentration, and even a mystical union with the spiritual and noetic realms.<sup>50</sup> Judah Halevi for instance, in his work, the '*Kuzari*' implies that the daily prayers and benedictions provide unique opportunities to activate in one's memory and imagination ancient

43 See Ibn Paquda, *Hovoth Ha-Levavoth*, section 10, chapter 1.

44 See, Idel, *Enchanted Chains*, pp. 190-195.

45 Idel, *Enchanted Chains*, p. 190.

46 See for instance Abraham Ibn Ezra's interpretation on Hosea (4:15); Abraham Ibn Ezra, *Yesod Mora Ve-Sod Torah: The Foundation of Piety and the Secret of the Torah*, edited by J. Cohen and U. Simon, Ramat Gan 2002, pp. 140-145; R. Abraham ben Nathan of Lunel, *Sefer Hamanhig*, Edited by Y. Raphael, Jerusalem 1978, p. 85.

47 See, Lobel, *A Sufi-Jewish Dialogue*, pp. 233-239;

48 This interesting fact was drawn to my attention by Professor Moshe Idel. On the issue of possible Sufi influence on early kabbalah see, Pedaya, *Vision and Speech*, pp. 171-200; Compare for instance to Idel, 'Ashkenazi Esotericism', p. 73 and note 11. Idel, 'The interpretation of Arayyot', p.183.

49 See Ezra ben Solomon, *Treatise on the 613 Commandments*, Jerusalem 1964, pp. 521-523.

50 See, Herald Kreisel, 'From Conversation to Contemplation: the Transformation of essence of Prayer in Medieval Jewish Philosophy in Provence', Shefa Tal: Studies in Jewish Thought and Culture presented to Bracha Sack, Edited by Z. Grees, H. Kriesel and B. Huss, Beer Sheva 2004, (Hebrew) pp. 59-83.

memories of the Jewish history of cleaving to God, and to reinforce memories of collective and perhaps even private moments of intimate conjunction with the divine.<sup>51</sup> Maimonides' famous phenomenology of prayer as the 'worship of the heart' leads to his understanding of prayer as the proper moment and context in daily life to concentrate one's heart and thoughts on God. In his model, this would ultimately lead to the ultimate, 'loving' worship of God that situates itself in an ongoing concentration of thought on the divine.<sup>52</sup>

In all of the above cases we find that the liturgy is the framework in which the higher purposes of spiritual transformation and the encounter with the divine can be achieved. For some, liturgical worship is even an instrument for achieving these goals. Thus, the nexus established between the 'commandments of the heart' and the 'worship of the heart' allowed for a new understanding of spiritual and mystical prayer to emerge. It should be noted that, at this stage, the spiritual practices which accompanied prayer did not yet involve any letter permutation techniques.

### III: Divine Names: Ashkenazi Influences on Early Kabbalah

In Ashkenazi mystical traditions, which in many respects continued the ancient forms of 'visionary' mysticism, we find an elaborate use of linguistic and numerological techniques, as well as a discussion of a linguistic ontology derived from *Sefer Yetzirah*.<sup>53</sup> It is clear that certain mystical prayer techniques involving the use of divine names 'migrated' from Ashkenaz to Spain and in particular to Catalonia.<sup>54</sup> Moshe Idel has demonstrated, for example, how a particular Ashkenazi esoteric tradition involving the vocalization of the divine names penetrated into the Nachmanidean School of Kabbalah in Barcelona.<sup>55</sup> There is also evidence of Ashkenazi influence on early Ecstatic Kabbalah including that of the Anonymous Commentary on the Prayers.<sup>56</sup>

The Ashkenazi tradition of letter combination techniques was centered on elaborate interpretations of *Sefer Yetzirah* and involved the portrayal of the process

51 Judah Ha-Levi, Kuzari, Part 3, 11-17. On Jewish memory embodied in halakhic ritual, see Moshe Idel, 'Memento Dei – Remarks on Remembering in Judaism', *IL Senso Della Memoria (Convegno Internazionale)*, Roma 2003, pp. 143-192.

52 Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, translated by S. Pines, Chicago and London 1962, III: 51, p. 621.

53 See, Scholem, *Major Trends*, pp. 98-103; Daniel Abrams, 'From Germany to Spain: Numerology as a Mystical Technique', *JJS* 47 (1996), pp. 85-101; Moshe Idel, *Enchanted Chains*, pp. 109-114, 125-133, 168-172.

54 Moshe Idel, 'Ashkenazi Esotericism', Scholem, *Origins*, pp. 97-123.

55 See Moshe Idel, 'Ashkenazi Esotericism', pp. 69-85.

56 See, Idel, 'Ashkenazi Esotericism', pp. 94-99; Afterman, *The Intention of Prayers*, pp. 115-117.

of God's creation. Complex techniques were developed that involved creating, manipulating, and meditating upon combinations of letters and divine names. For instance, the letters of the *Tetragrammaton* would be combined with each of the letters of the alphabet, or individual letters would be joined to all of the other letters of the Hebrew alphabet.<sup>57</sup>

In Ashkenazi interpretations of the liturgy, references can be found to rituals resembling magical practices. The fact that some parts of the Jewish liturgy are centered on material and mundane needs provided an adequate background for the employment of linguistic techniques correlated to magic, as a tool to effectively produce the mundane aims specified in the daily prayer. The magical techniques based on linguistic components were correlated to one of the most fundamental dimensions of prayer as an instrument for the fulfillment of human needs. The demand, often stressed amongst practitioners of magic, for strict accuracy in the recitation of the linguistic components of a ritual, finds articulation in Ashkenazi commentaries on the liturgy. There, we find a practice of counting the exact number of letters in the different components or meta-components of the liturgical text.<sup>58</sup>

Daniel Abrams has demonstrated how an Ashkenazi technique of counting letters served also as a technique for inducing altered states of consciousness. This mystical technique that involves counting the numerical value of the letters of a prayer was practiced by Ashkenazi masters and similar techniques were later used by ecstatic kabbalists like Abraham Abulafia.<sup>59</sup> The *halakhic* authority Jacob ben Asher, whose family migrated from Ashkenaz to Spain, reported that the German Hasidim 'were in the habit of counting or calculating every word in the prayers, benedictions, and hymns, and they sought a reason in the Torah for the number of words in the prayers.'<sup>60</sup>

This element in Ashkenazi commentaries of the liturgy is highly relevant in attempting to understand the technique of letter permutation in the Anonymous Commentary since it provides a meta-linguistic structure that approaches the liturgical text not only as a body of propositions or as a coherent text but rather as a sequence of letters that is subject to powerful linguistic techniques. The belief that, at least on one level, the liturgical text is a linguistic substratum that can be manipulated by powerful linguistic techniques, that this substratum can have particular magical effects regardless of the semantic layer, and that the same techniques may produce ecstatic effects, constitutes important background to the Anonymous Commentary.

57 See, Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, pp. 99-100.

58 Joseph Dan, *The Esoteric Theology of Ashkenazi Hasidism*, Jerusalem 1968, pp. 76-78 (Hebrew).

59 Abrams, 'From Germany to Spain', pp. 92-94, 100.

60 Jacob ben Asher, *Arbaah Turim*, Orach Hayim, section 113, translated and quoted by Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 100.

The well known esoteric tradition, transmitted by Nachmanides in his commentary on the Torah, that the Torah can be viewed as one long name of God made up of a specific sequence of letters, was influential in the Ecstatic Kabbalah.<sup>61</sup> Nachmanides, who wrote a short commentary on the first chapter of *Sefer Yetzirah*, was very careful, however, not to employ any active letter permutation technique as a hermeneutic or mystical tool. He thus limited the influence of *Sefer Yetzirah* and Ashkenazi innovations based on that work to a minimum.<sup>62</sup> The application of a sophisticated system of letter combination on a substratum of letters originates in Ashkenaz and was used by the Anonymous Commentator, who combined this theory with kabbalistic-mystical and theurgical notions of *kavannah* in prayer. Similar linguistic structures were adopted and used by Abraham Abulafia as a technique to attain prophecy and induce ecstatic experiences<sup>63</sup> and as part of a very sophisticated exegetical technique.<sup>64</sup> Abulafia and the Anonymous Commentator were particularly interested, as Idel has noted, in the dynamic aspects of the Ashkenazi techniques that involved recitation of the divine names. The movement of linguistic techniques based on *Sefer Yetzirah* from Ashkenaz to Catalonia found its expression in the letter permutation techniques used in the early Ecstatic Kabbalah.<sup>65</sup> The Anonymous Commentary used meta-linguistic structures of letter permutation similar to those of the earlier Ashkenazi mystical tradition both as its main ontological structure<sup>66</sup> and as a technique of '*kavannah*' in prayer that was intended to induce ecstasy and prophecy during the performance of the ritual.<sup>67</sup> It should be noted that Ashkenazi traditions were not the only influencing factor in the emergence of letter permutation techniques in Catalan Kabbalah.<sup>68</sup>

61 See Idel, *Absorbing Perfection*, pp. 321-324; Afterman, *The Intention of Prayer*, pp. 10 note 6, 43-45 and note 43; Gershom Scholem, 'The Name of God and the Linguistic theory of the Kabbala', *Diogenes* 79 (1972), p. 78; Haviva Pedy, *Nachmanides: Cyclical Time and Holy Text*, Tel Aviv 2003, pp. 173-178; Ezra ben Solomon's *Talmudic exegesis*, MS. Vatican 294, fol34a; Isaiah Tishby, *Commentary on Talmudic Aggadah by Rabbi Azriel of Gerona*, Jerusalem 1982, pp. 37-38.

62 See the statement of Shem Tov Ibn Goan, a student of Nachmanides school, in his treatise, *Badei Ha'aron*, Jerusalem 2001, p. 1, where he testifies that subjects connected to *Sefer Yetzirah* were not included in the kabbalistic curriculum of Nachmanides and his circle.

63 Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, pp. 98-102; Idel, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 22-23; Moshe Idel, *Golem*, pp. 96-104; Idel, 'Ashkenazi Esotericism', pp. 102-103.

64 See Moshe Idel, *Language, Torah and Hermeneutics*, pp. 95-119; Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, pp. 265-271.

65 See Moshe Idel, 'Ashkenazi Esotericism', pp. 102-103; Daniel Abrams, 'From Germany to Spain'.

66 See Afterman, *The Intention of Prayers*, pp. 38-58.

67 Afterman, *The Intention of Prayers*, pp. 87-98.

68 See, Nicolas Sed, 'Le Sefer ha-Razim et la methode de "combinaison de Letters"', *REJ* 130 (1971), pp. 295-304; Moshe Idel, 'Ashkenazi Esotericism and Kabbalah in Barcelona', p. 100, note 105.

## IV: Kavannah in Early Kabbalah

Without undermining the importance of Ashkenazi Esotericism and other possible sources analyzed above in influencing the innovative interpretations of *kavannah* and *devekuth* in the early *Kabbalah*, I would suggest that the movements in theology and techniques of meditation that were based on the *Tetragrammaton* were more fundamental in this development. The early kabbalists made explicit use of the writings of Maimonides in order to reconstruct their notion of contemplative *kavannah* and mystical conjunction.<sup>69</sup> Others, although influenced by Maimonides' theology, were also critical to some degree of his purely rationalistic interpretation of prayer and of the notion of *devekuth*.<sup>70</sup> It is my opinion that the kabbalistic notion of *kavannah* in prayer did not represent a rebellion against theological interpretations such as those of Maimonides, but rather a sophisticated adaptation that fused together theurgy, contemplative mysticism, magic, and Ashkenazi traditions.<sup>71</sup> These notions, in turn, were fused with Ashkenazi and Neo-Platonic structures, thus allowing for the mystical *kavannah* of early Kabbalah to emerge. With the emergence of medieval Kabbalah, a strong affinity developed between liturgical worship, mystical practice, and ecstatic experience.<sup>72</sup> The contemplative, Neo-Platonist kind of mysticism practiced by Yitchak Sagi Naor and his disciples, was based on three fundamental concepts: *devekuth* - mystical union with the godhead; *kavannah* - mystical intention and concentration of thought during performance of ritual; and *theurgy* - an exchange of power between the illuminated and the godhead. The unique combination of contemplative elevation of thought and soul, mystical union with the divine, and theurgist practice intended to affect the godhead, formed the central core of the early kabbalistic understanding of *kavannah*.<sup>73</sup>

69 See, for instance, R. Asher ben David His Complete Works and Studies in his Kabbalistic Thought, edited by Daniel Abrams, Los Angeles 1996, (Hebrew), p. 80; Commentary on Talmudic Aggadot by Rabbi Azriel of Gerona, Edited by Isaiah Tishby, Jerusalem 1982 (Hebrew), p. 20 and note 11.

70 See, Scholem, *Origins*, p. 382.

71 Cf. Joseph Dan, 'The Emergence of Mystical Prayer', in: Joseph Dan, *Jewish Mysticism: The Middle Ages*, Hoboken 1998, pp. 221-257. See also Elliot Wolfson, 'Beneath the wings of the Great Eagle: Maimonides and thirteenth-century Kabbalah', *Moses Maimonides (1138-1204): His Religious, Scientific, and Philosophical "Wirkungsgeschichte" in Different Cultural Contexts*, Edited by, Görg K. Hasselhoff and Otfried Fraisse. Würzburg, Ergon Verlag 2004, pp. 222-223.

72 See, Gershom Scholem, *Origins*, pp. 188-198, 205-248, 274-288, 299-309, 381-382, and 412-418; Gershom Scholem, 'The concept of Kavvanah in the Early Kabbalah', *Studies in Jewish Thought*, edited by A. Jospe, Detroit 1981, pp. 162-180..

73 Scholem, *Origins*, pp. 100-102, 412; Scholem, 'The Concept', pp. 168-174; Idel, 'On R. Issac Sagi Nahor's mystical intention', pp. 30-35 ; Moshe Idel, 'Prayer in Provence Kabbalah', pp. 277-280; Moshe Idel, 'Some Remarks on Ritual and Mysticism in Geronese Kabbalah', *Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 3 (1993), pp. 111-130; Moshe Idel, 'Prayer in Provence Kabbalah', *Likkutei Tarbiz* 6 (2003), pp. 421-442 (Hebrew) ; Moshe Idel, 'Kavvanah in Prayer in early Kabbalah- between Ashkenaz and Provence', *Porat Yosef: in honor of Dr. Josef Safran*, New Jersey 1992, pp. 5-14 (Hebrew); Moshe Idel, *Enchanted Chains*, pp. 21-22, 66-67, 132-133, 172-180; Elliot Wolfson, *Through a Speculum That Shines*, pp. 288-306; Elliot Wolfson, *Language, Eros and Being*, New York 2004, pp. 122-125, 207-212, 218-220, 246-255, 263-265, 348-351; Elliot Wolfson, 'Mystical-

For the early kabbalists, praying and observing the mitzvot in a proper state of *kavannah* was the locus of religious action and mystical experience. In their eyes, this concept stood at the heart of the ancient mystical tradition. Philosophically oriented practices involving concentration on the *Tetragrammaton* merged with Neo-Platonic techniques of elevation and union of thought, and with theurgist practices that find their origins in rabbinic sources.<sup>74</sup> *Kavannah* came to include a contemplative ascension of thought and sometimes of the soul which would cleave to and thus unify the godhead. The first kabbalists borrowed from philosophical practices involving concentration upon the divine name (taken from Abraham ibn Ezra and Maimonides) and the appellation, 'worship of the heart', in order to situate their new understanding of *kavannah* in prayer and blessings.<sup>75</sup> *Kavannah*, as the early kabbalists understood it, included a series of procedures that were to take place first in the human mind or heart and later in the parallel aspects of the Divine: concentration, elevation, conjunction<sup>76</sup>, manipulation of the letters of the *Tetragrammaton*, and various theurgist acts intended to cause unification and movement of power between the kabbalist and the dynamic yet unified godhead. The philosophical practices involving contemplation and concentration on the divine name were thus developed into a fully-fledged set of practices based on a Neo-Platonic understanding of elevation of thought and mystical union as articulated in earlier Jewish and Arab Neo-Platonic spirituality.<sup>77</sup> As a result, they developed a Neo-Platonic type of mystical practice that is executed during the performance of the commandments and especially as part of the *kavannah* in prayer and blessings.<sup>78</sup>

These mystical interpretations of *halakhic* practice were almost always presented as being as ancient as the law itself.<sup>79</sup> This was particularly true of the tradition concerning mystical utilization of the divine names, which has roots in the ancient liturgical worship that took place in the Temple in Jerusalem.<sup>80</sup> The centrality of the divine names in the ancient temple worship, according to the early kabbalists, was replaced with a similar centrality in the revised liturgy. In addition

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Theurgical Dimensions of Prayer in Sefer ha-Rimonim', *Approaches to Judaism in Medieval times* 3 (1988), pp. 41-

74 See Idel, *Kabbalah-New Perspectives*, pp. 173-199.

75 See Wolfson, *Language, Eros and Being*, pp. 207-212, 219-220.

76 Wolfson, *Language, Eros and Being*, p. 209.

77 One example of importance is the Neo-Platonic spirituality of the 11<sup>th</sup> century mystic and poet, Solomon ibn Gabirol, who offered a fascinating attempt to synthesize Jewish Mysticism including both 'Visionary Mysticism' and Sefer Yetzirah' with Neo-Platonic notions of spiritual transformation and mystical union. Specifically, Ibn Gabirol developed a practice of concentration, elevation, and mystical union centered on the divine wisdom identified with the 'Sefirah Hokhmah' of Sefer Yetzirah.

78 See Scholem, *Origins*, pp. 243-248, 299-308, and 412-420.

79 See Ezra ben Solomon, *Commentary on Song of Songs*, Chavell edition, Jerusalem 1994, p. 478

80 See Sandra Valabregue-Perry and Adam Afterman, 'The Utilization of Divine Names in the Temple Worship on the Day of Atonement', "In This Way He is to Enter into the Holy": Holiness in Time and Man, Jerusalem 2005, pp. 125-129 (Hebrew).

to the association with ancient temple worship, kabbalistic *kavannah* also came to be viewed as continuous with the practices of a group of pietists referred to in the *Mishna* as the *Hasidim Ha-Rishonim* ('Early Pious Ones'), who reportedly would spend an extended period of time directing their thoughts toward God before beginning the recitation of their prayers.<sup>81</sup>

The early kabbalists understood *kavannah* as follows. The practice would begin in the human domain, with the visualization of the letters of a name in the heart or imagination.<sup>82</sup> The elevated thought would then penetrate the divine realms, where it would unite with the divine name or versions of the divine names embodied in the *Sefiroth* and in the 'divine letters'. The unification of the divine name and the metaphysical letters and the unification of the divine realm would thus be accomplished through the union of the divine and the human. Once the mystical union is established, divine power would 'flow' from the higher realms to the lower, from the higher *Sefiroth* to the lower ones, and ultimately into the human mind, into mundane reality and into human history. The benediction or prayer was understood as a theurgist act drawing blessing to the divine name and to the human who is cleaving to God.<sup>83</sup> Since some of the divine names on which kabbalists would meditate are constituted by a complex system of letter permutation that makes use of verses from the Torah, as in the case of the divine 'Name of 72 Letters', and since the act of *kavannah* was based on concentration upon letters of the divine names, a connection was established between *kavannah* and complex linguistic systems. The mystical notion of *kavannah*, then, was viewed as an attempt to elevate the human thought up the ladder of divine emanation and eventually to join human thought with the higher aspects of the godhead, especially to the triad of the Noetic *Sefiroth*<sup>84</sup> and to the 'metaphysical' letters of the *Tetragrammaton*.

Together the cleaving of human thought to 'divine thought'<sup>85</sup> and the process of drawing light and power into the godhead and into the human mind<sup>86</sup> constitute the innovation in the way that the early kabbalists conceived of traditional liturgical practices. This way, through their understanding of the notion of *kavannah*, the

81 Mishna Berakhoth, 5, 1.

82 See Wolfson, *Through the Speculum that Shines*, pp. 289-306. Wolfson, *Language, Eros and Being*, pp. 122-123.

83 Afterman, *The Intention of Prayers*, pp. 80-82, 90-92, 111-112, 121; Idel, 'Some Remarks on Ritual and Mysticism', pp. 123-125; Haviva Pedaya, *Name and Sanctuary in the Teaching of R. Isaac the Blind: a Comparative Study in the Writings of the Earliest Kabbalists*, Jerusalem 2001, pp. 163-164 (Hebrew); Wolfson, *Through a Speculum That Shines*, p. 292; Idel, 'On R. Issac Sagi Nahor's Mystical Intention', pp. 31-38; Scholem, *Origins*, pp. 65, 100-102, 195-196, 306; Gershom Scholem, 'The concept', p. 168, 174; Bahir, Daniel Abrams edition, Los Angeles, sections 66, 77-78, 80-83, 87, 95.

84 Moshe Idel, 'Powers of Thought in Jewish Mysticism', I Poeteri Della Mente E Gli Stati Di Coscienza, Rome 2004, pp. 80-82.

85 Scholem, *Origins*, pp. 126-127, 271-289.

86 See, Elliot Wolfson, *Through a Speculum that Shines*, pp. 297-300; Scholem, *Origins*, pp. 299-309, 412-430; Haviva Pedia, *Vision and Speech*, pp. 140-207.

early kabbalists transformed *halakhic* ritual into a powerful mystical contemplative instrument, designed both to affect the godhead and to draw the human being and the divine closer.<sup>87</sup> Thus, this circle of kabbalists, active during the first half of the 13<sup>th</sup> Century in Gerona, Catalonia, offered a fully-fledged contemplative mysticism coupled with a revolutionary understanding of Jewish ritual practice. The Anonymous Commentary was influenced by their unique, mystical understanding of *kavannah* and quotes from them extensively.<sup>88</sup> Combining this understanding with a technique most likely derived from Ashkenazi Esotericism, as well as with a particular theory about the utilization of divine names in prayer and liturgy that is articulated in the book of *Bahir*<sup>89</sup>, the Anonymous Commentator created a new and unique brand of Ecstatic Kabbalah.

## V: Ecstasy and Prayer in the Anonymous Commentary:

The Commentary on the Prayers and Benedictions written, as I have argued, by an anonymous author in Catalonia in the third quarter of the 13<sup>th</sup> Century, quotes extensively from the *Bahir*<sup>90</sup>, from Ezra ben Solomon's commentary on the Talmudic exegesis and Song of Songs,<sup>91</sup> and from the 'long version' of the 'Book of Contemplation.'<sup>92</sup> The Anonymous Commentator presents a linguistic ontology deriving from *Sefer Yetzirah*, with special emphasis on the linguistic components of divine letters and alphabets. At the same time, he articulates an extraordinarily complex technique of letter permutation that is presented as a method of attaining ecstasy during the recitation of prayers and blessings. This unique letter permutation technique is in some respects similar to techniques described by Abraham Abulafia and by later ecstatic kabbalists.<sup>93</sup> It is unique, however, in its complicated application to prayer and *kavannah* and in its complex understanding of liturgical ritual. Although the specific technique of letter permutation used by the Anonymous Commentator was apparently drawn from Ashkenazi interpretations of *Sefer Yetzirah*, the correlation between the letter permutation technique and *kavannah* is unique to the Anonymous Commentary.

87 Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, p.269.

88 See, Afterman, *The Intention of Prayers*, pp. 118-131.

89 On this theory as articulated in the *Bahir* see Afterman, *The Intention of Prayers*, pp. 73-74, 80-81, 90-91, 139-142, and 162; Scholem, *Origins*, pp. 100-102, 194-196.

90 See Daniel Abrams, *The Book Bahir: An Edition Based on the Earliest Manuscripts*, Los Angeles 1994, p. 72.

91 Afterman, *The Intention of Prayers*, pp. 118-131.

92 Afterman, *The Intention of Prayers*, pp. 117-118; Mark Verman, *The Books of Contemplation*, Albany 1992, p. 64, p. 75 note 122, p. 76 note 128; Scholem, *Origins*, p. 345 note 291.

93 Moshe Idel, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 13-52.

The author of the Anonymous Commentary made use of notions of *kavannah* that already existed in the early Kabbalah, particularly that of the Gerona Circle and the *Bahir*. Chiefly, the author borrowed the understanding of *kavannah* as the contemplative union of the human thought with the linguistic realm of the divine alphabet, and the idea of theurgist actions that can induce the drawing of light and power from these metaphysical alphabets into the human realm. By combining these elements with Ashkenazi linguistic ontology and technique, the Anonymous Commentator created a unique kind of Linguistic-Ecstatic Kabbalah that, to the best of my knowledge, cannot be found in any other kabbalistic text.

The conception of *kavannah* as centered on meditation upon divine names and of these divine names as complex linguistic entities constituted through a process of letter permutations, led to a kind of mystical practice that used the divine names as a substratum for the linguistic technique of letter permutation. The understanding of *kavannah* as an act of concentration, conjunction and permutation of the letters that make up metaphysical entities which are perceived as divine 'names' (such as the *Sefiroth*) was drawn by the Anonymous Commentator from Catalan Kabbalah. This conception was combined with a sophisticated technique of letter permutation which was applied to the liturgical text and to the complex divine names. Letter permutation functioned not only as an ontological scheme but also as a hermeneutical technique that could be applied to other texts such as the Torah and *Midrashic* works. It also served as a mental technique capable of producing ecstatic experiences. We find then that the same mystical technique served both as an ontology and as a magical-mystical technique. Since the different dimensions were seen as interconnected and governed by the same meta-linguistic structure, the manipulation of that meta-linguistic structure through meditative contemplation was thought to lead to effective 'results' in all of these dimensions.

## VI: Linguistic Continua and 'Cord-Like' Ontology

The main 'form of order'<sup>94</sup> found in the Anonymous Commentary is the 'Linguistic Form,' developed from *Sefer Yetzirah*, ordering both ontology and ritual practice. Comprehension of this linguistic system is the key both to interpreting the liturgical text and ceremony and to activating *kavannah* during mystical liturgical practice.<sup>95</sup> The linguistic system is based on four 'divine alphabets.' Each alphabet is made up of the 22 Hebrew letters and all four alphabets are situated on

94 This term is used by Moshe Idel in Idel, 'On Some Forms of Order in Kabbalah,' *Daat* 50-52 (2003), pp. 45-49.

95 See *Commentary*, Afterman Edition, pp. 209-213.

special metaphysical circles. Each one is conceived of as a 22-letter 'name of God'.<sup>96</sup> These 'divine alphabets' have a similar ontological status to the *Sefiroth*, based on the idea in *Sefer Yetzirah* that the basic divine components are ten *Sefiroth* and 22 divine letters. The 'Linguistic-Theology' of the Anonymous Commentary is based on these four divine alphabets.<sup>97</sup>

The alphabets in the Anonymous Commentator's system together form a linguistic continuum.<sup>98</sup> This continuum begins with the first and highest alphabet, the highest aspect of the linguistic godhead. The highest alphabet emanates the lower three alphabets which, in turn, culminate in the spirit of the individual kabbalist who holds and manipulates the Hebrew letters in his mind and on his tongue. The three alphabets that lie between the highest one and the human being are interconnected and are part of a 'cord-like' linguistic continuum. They are accessible to human comprehension and, accordingly, are subject to human manipulation by means of conjunction, meditation upon the divine letters, and combination of particular letters. New permutations of letters from the divine alphabets, in turn, create new names or sequences of letters that may be used during liturgical rituals. The divine 'Name of 72 Letters' is considered by the Anonymous Commentator to be paradigmatic of the capacity of the circles of alphabets to create divine names given the appropriate linguistic substrata, and is itself used as a substratum for many techniques of letter permutation in Ecstatic Kabbalah.<sup>99</sup>

The Anonymous Commentary suggests that just as the 'Name of 72 Letters' was drawn from the Torah and is used as a magical-mystical device<sup>100</sup>, as a substratum for a technique of letter permutation, the text of the liturgy itself can be used in such a manner as well. Doing so would result in the formation of different names that may be used as part of the prayer, particularly in the parts of the liturgy that are concerned with the fulfillment of mundane, physical needs.<sup>101</sup> This is connected to the previously mentioned tradition, transmitted by Nachmanides and Ezra ben Solomon, which views the Torah as a long sequence of letters that constitutes a single name of God.<sup>102</sup> The conception of divine names created by circles of alphabets and the idea that different linguistic substrata can be used in techniques of letter permutation led

96 See Afterman, *The Intention of Prayers*, pp. 52-56.

97 See Afterman, *The Intention of Prayers*, pp. 38-54.

98 On the linguistic continua see Moshe Idel, *Enchanted Chains*, pp. 25, 53-58; Afterman, *The Intention of Prayers*, p. 96.

99 See Moshe Idel, *Nocturnal Kabbalists*, Jerusalem 2006, (Hebrew), pp. 110-116.

100 The Anonymous Commentator analyzes the first 'name' of the '72 Letter Name': the name [Vav Hey Vav] that is used as a magical name: "The first name derived from the 72 letter name is 'vhv' and this name is capable of rescue and survival" (Commentary, Afterman edition, p. 211).

101 *Commentary*, Afterman Edition, pp. 209-211; Afterman, *The Intention of Prayers*, pp. 101-104.

102 See, Elliot Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 200-201; Moshe Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, pp. 321-326; Gershom Scholem, 'The Name of God and The Linguistic Theory of Kabbalah', *Diogenes* 79 (1972), p. 78; Haviva Pedy, Nahmanides, pp. 173-178 (Hebrew); Afterman, *The Intention of Prayers*, pp. 10, 44.

the Anonymous Commentator to create a sophisticated system of letter permutation that uses the text of the liturgy itself as a substratum for generating 'divine names' that have the power to affect the world in various ways if used correctly during the liturgical ceremony.

The identification of the alphabets with the divine names allowed the Anonymous Commentator to connect the pre-existing theosophical-theurgist notion of *kavannah* based on divine names to this linguistic technique. The divine alphabets function as the divine names and as the *Sefiroth* in the theosophical-theurgist scheme. The divine names are conceived of as complex linguistic entities represented on divine circles and, as such, they are subject to the permutation technique.<sup>103</sup> *Kavannah* involves concentration of thought on the linguistic entities considered 'meta-alphabets', followed by permutation of the relevant letters of the divine 'meta-names'. The text of the liturgy itself is used as a substratum for the linguistic technique; its letters are 'absorbed' into the encircling alphabets that constitute the letter permutation system. The permutations of the specific letters absorbed from the text of the liturgy then serve as a substratum for a mystical-magical technique of permutation. The outcome of such permutation is that the 'inner essences' of the letters merge together and this essence is drawn towards the human world, achieving a particular outcome in direct correlation to the specific letters processed.

The connection between the alphabets, the letter permutation technique, and the divine names are the key in attempting to understand the mystical notion of *kavannah* in the Anonymous Commentary. The understanding that the letter permutation technique involves the breaking down of divine names into discrete components and their reformulation into new names is well developed, as Moshe Idel has demonstrated with respect to the Ecstatic Kabbalah of Abraham Abulafia.<sup>104</sup> This process was believed to dramatically affect the human consciousness and to lead to ecstatic experiences. According to Abulafia, the structure of the divine names must then "be destroyed in order to exploit the 'prophetic' potential of the Names and to create a series of new structures by means of letter combinations. In the course of the changes taking place in the structure of the Name, the structure of human consciousness likewise changes."<sup>105</sup>

In a similar manner, the anonymous author uses his own technique to 'break down' the liturgical text and create new combinations of letters, thus affecting the worshiper's consciousness as well as the divine and human worlds. Every act of *kavannah* involves the mental permutation of a specific sequence of letters from the three lower alphabets in accordance with the liturgical text and context. The technique 'absorbs' elements of the liturgy and subsequently functions as a kind

103 See Afterman, *The Intention of Prayers*, pp. 35-57.

104 See Moshe Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, pp. 13-52.

105 Moshe Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, p. 19. Idel, *Hasidism*, pp. 57-58.

of magical tool, creating new and dramatic affects. Using a series of charts, the worshiper recognizes key terms in the liturgical text and correlates them to specific letters that 'govern' these elements, objects, and needs.<sup>106</sup> The act of permutation is executed in the 'dimension' of human thought that has elevated itself to the realm of the metaphysical alphabets, working on letters that appear like "great mountains."<sup>107</sup>

Since the godhead himself is 'made' out of the Hebrew alphabet and since the human spirit has the capacity to use the 'Godly Language' and to manipulate its ingredients, it is possible for the human thought to attain comprehension of *all* phenomena using this linguistic science, to influence the inner dynamics of the godhead, and to draw power from the divine letters into the human world. Inside the human mind, these monadic essences<sup>108</sup> can then be translated into semantic propositions disclosing secretive, mystical information. Alternatively, they may be translated into an angelic being with the capacity to affect the mundane needs mentioned in the prayer, or into the revelation of such a being as part of an ecstatic experience undergone by the worshiper.

Since the linguistic continuum is a 'cord-like' ontology, the physical features throughout the continuum are identical, differing only in their inner or spiritual qualities.<sup>109</sup> Each letter is thought to be a complex entity including a physical body, a formal representation, and a soul or inner essence.<sup>110</sup> Moshe Idel has noted that the Anonymous Commentary is one of the first kabbalistic texts to articulate a monadic theory of the Hebrew Alphabet.<sup>111</sup> Since each letter consists of a body and a spiritual essence, it is possible, as part of a linguistic-talismanic liturgical practice, to draw the inner essence or power from the letters of the godhead toward the human spirit.<sup>112</sup> Permutation of letters results in the creation of a new letter sequence, thus allowing for the content, 'light' or 'voice' to be transmitted 'through' the letters down into the human mind and human reality. Each sequence of letters serves as a channel or 'cord' allowing for specific content to descend. These letter sequences transmit their mystical content in a manner comparable to the way in which 'regular' sequences of letters transmit meaning. The liturgical text is perceived as a chart or a map

106 See Afterman, *The Intention of Prayers*, pp. 57-59.

107 See *Commentary*, Afterman Edition, p. 210 (with correction based on the apparatus on p. 295): "Each one of the letters of the Alphabet contains a great principle and secret and a hidden reason (content), and each of them is a great mountain which it is prevented to climb on". On the notion of letters appearing as mountains in Ecstatic Kabbalah, see Moshe Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, pp. 101-102, 156 note 128.

108 See Moshe Idel, *Hasidism*, pp. 153-156.

109 See Moshe Idel, *Enchanted Chains*, pp. 59-60

110 *Commentary*, Afterman Edition, p. 209.

111 Moshe Idel, *Hasidism*, P. 339 note 52.

112 See *Commentary*, Afterman Edition, pp. 209, 255, where the author quotes from earlier kabbalistic authors: Ezra ben Solomon's Commentary on the Talmud, printed in Likutai Schkecha u Pea, fol 4a, and Isaac the Blind's commentary on the Book of Creation, appendix in: Gershom Scholem, *The Kabbalah in Provence*, Jerusalem 1963 (Hebrew), pp. 10, 14.

indicating the relevant sequences of letters that need to be 'arranged' above in the linguistic divine realm. Once the appropriate sequences of letters are combined, the specific content can be transmitted from the divine to the lower realms of existence. The inner essences of the letters are manipulated by kabbalists who must know the exact elements that are involved in each part of the prayer. Linguistic techniques performed during prayer and daily benedictions thus have the power, according to the Anonymous Commentary, to unify the linguistic mind with the divine powers that exist inside the letters of the divine alphabets.

## VII: Hyper-Linguistic Kabbalah and Ecstatic Prayer in the Anonymous Commentary

The Anonymous Commentary presents an interesting and complex kind of Linguistic-Ecstatic Kabbalah which uniquely fuses the notion of *kavannah* in prayer and benedictions with mystical technique and ecstatic experience. The Commentary is considered the earliest source in the history of Jewish Mysticism to develop a clear and articulated practice of *kavannah* that is based on a technique involving letter permutation.<sup>113</sup> According to Idel, the term '*kavannah*', as used in the Anonymous Commentary, "describe[s] the synthesis between the liturgical ritual and a mystical technique very similar to that of Abulafia"<sup>114</sup>. The linguistic techniques and the linguistic experiences were embodied in (or, in Moshe Idel's view, artificially imposed on) the already existing liturgical text and ceremony.<sup>115</sup> The belief that permutation of letters can be used to draw the 'monadic essence' of letters into the human mind is well developed in Ecstatic Kabbalah, but only in the Anonymous Commentary is this technique identified with *kavannah* in prayer.<sup>116</sup> Though less influential than Abraham Abulafia's Ecstatic Kabbalah, the version created by the Anonymous Commentator—a type of Linguistic-Ecstatic Kabbalah—was distinct. The existence of this model demonstrates that already at the early stages of Ecstatic Kabbalah at least one attempt had been made to construct a 'nomian' kind of Ecstatic Kabbalah. In the Anonymous Commentary, the relationship between the human and the divine is mediated by linguistic entities tied to the Hebrew alphabet. This allows for *halakhic* practices, in particular those that are language-based, to be viewed as instruments for contemplation

113 See, Afterman, *The Intention of Prayers*, pp. 87-98; Idel, *Enchanted Chains*, p. 181.

114 Idel, *Hasidism*, p. 156.

115 See Idel, 'Ramon Lull', p. 172: 'at least on the basis of the commentary on the liturgy, the anonymous author has artificially superimposed an exegetical technique which does not clarify the text being commented upon'. Afterman, *The Intention of Prayers*, pp. 18-22, 62-64

116 Idel, *Hasidism*, pp. 155-156.

and manipulation of the linguistic divine. Prayers and blessings that are centered on the divine names become the key in a process of contemplation, elevation, and union with the ‘higher’ linguistic realms. By concentrating on linguistic elements of *halakhic* practice, the kabbalist can connect to and act upon the corresponding linguistic elements—in particular the divine name—in the higher, metaphysical realms, actively ‘opening’ channels of letters transmitting mystical content from above.

The linguistic elements of the prayer and the blessings are accompanied by a contemplative component that was adapted from Ezra ben Solomon’s Neo-Platonic type of *kavannah*.<sup>117</sup> The worshiper must concentrate on and conjoin his thought to the divine alphabets as a preliminary condition for the permutation itself. He must prevent his thought from drifting away<sup>118</sup> and only then can he implement the technique of letter permutation. Ezra ben Solomon and other early kabbalists used Neo-Platonic theories of elevation of thought and mystical union to enhance the spiritual and mystical dimensions of prayer. For them, this aspect of the liturgical performance was carefully and closely embedded into the ritual and into the liturgical texts.

In the Anonymous Commentary, on the other hand, the meta-linguistic structure of alphabet permutation is developed independently of prayer and liturgy. The meta-structure and technique were apparently adapted from Ashkenazi understandings of the linguistic ontology found in *Sefer Yetzirah*. In other words, this scheme was articulated independently of any ritual or commandment, and was later applied by the Anonymous Commentator to the prayer ritual.

A key difference between Ezra ben Solomon’s theory of *kavannah* and the ecstatic *kavannah* of the Anonymous Commentator can be found in the ways that each of them understood the relationship between *kavannah* and the liturgical text and ceremony. For Ezra ben Solomon, *kavannah* is an integral part of the prayer itself; in other words, it is part of a practice that involves a definite text whose semantic layer is considered important. Thus, a balance is maintained between the mystical-theurgist elements that are added to the ritual and the original practice itself, which preserves its original content as well. While the worshiper pronounces the divine name as part of the blessing or prayer, he performs a mystical practice.<sup>119</sup> This practice does not prevent the reading of the other parts of the text and does not undermine the conventional performance of the prayer and blessing.

In the case of the Anonymous Commentator’s practice, however, the mystical technique is more powerful than the original text and ceremony. The Anonymous

117 See, *Commentary*, Afterman Edition, p. 231, 288; Afterman, *The Intention of Prayers*, p. 92.

118 See Ezra ben Solomon’s Commentary on the Agadoth, Likutai Sichecha Upea, 17a.

119 See Moshe Idel, ‘On R. Issac Sagi Nahor’s Mystical Intention of the Eighteen Benedictions’; Idel, *R. Menachem Recanati*, pp. 131-141; Wolfson, *Through a speculum that shines*, pp. 288-306; Pedaya, *Vision and Speech*, pp. 140-162; Afterman, *The Intention of Prayers*, pp. 119-129.

Commentator's technique, based on discrete letters and their 'monadic essences,' ultimately fragments the liturgical text. Since the linguistic technique breaks the words of the liturgy into discrete sets of letters independent of their original configuration and meaning, the technique can be said to relate to the text of the liturgy on a sub-semantic level. This might lead one to question whether in fact this scheme can accurately be described as 'nomian.' The claim could be made that the use of such a powerful technique, with its focus on the sub-semantic, would lead not to a 'nomian' understanding of liturgical practice, but rather to an 'a-nomian' interpretation. By making use of this powerful linguistic instrument, the worshiper absorbs and then fragments the liturgical text; this might be understood as 'a-nomian' in the sense that the conventional, semantic understanding of the liturgy becomes irrelevant.<sup>120</sup> This would seem to suggest, then, that the Anonymous Commentary should be viewed as a kind of ecstatic-magical manual to the prayer book rather than as a commentary in the regular sense. This type of interpretation should be compared to Abraham Abulafia's most advanced technique of Torah interpretation in which he breaks the canonical text into discrete letters which consist of divine names.<sup>121</sup>

## VIII: The Letter Permutation Technique

The letter permutation technique is based on a rich matrix of objects, concepts, and names, corresponding to particular letters in the different divine alphabets. This system of representation and organization of concepts has roots in *Sefer Yetzirah*.<sup>122</sup> The permutation technique thus involves a system made up of dynamic parts that are connected to the alphabetical ontology. Before one can make use of the technique, one must gain understanding both of the dynamics of letter permutation and of the web of interrelations between the various particulates as represented in special charts.<sup>123</sup> This knowledge is derived, learned, and meditated upon independently and prior to the performance of any ritual. During the act of *kavannah*, then, the kabbalist combines different letters of the liturgical text—their 'roots'—in the divine realm. Letters situated in one of the three lower alphabets are combined into a unique permutation. Their discrete monadic essence is thus drawn out, combined with other essences, and transmitted through the prism of the lower alphabets into the human mind and the physical world.

120 See Idel, 'Ramon Lull,' p. 172.

121 Idel, *Hasidism*, p. 57.

122 See *Sefer Yetzirah*, chapters 3-6.

123 On the special charts used in the letter permutation technique, see Afterman, *The Intention of prayers*, pp. 56-59; and the charts in the *Commentary*, Afterman Edition, pp. 213-215, 228-229.

The magical-talismanic model centers on the human capacity to draw the divine power of the letters into the mundane realm and to satisfy concrete needs specified in the words of the prayer. The talismanic instrument is constituted of the letters themselves, which are both the source of power and a device serving as a transmitter of mystical power, light, and speech. The mystical content is drawn from the metaphysical realms into the human world, which is itself conceived of as a linguistic matrix of letters. Through the permutation technique, the kabbalist can create 'channels' of power that allow the multiphase content to descend from the linguistic divine down to a reality that is constituted of and governed by letters. The aim of this practice is twofold. First, this mystical technique is a way to transform the human mind and unite it with the linguistic godhead. Second, the permutation of letters draws emanation from the higher alphabet through the lower alphabets and, ultimately, down to man. This emanation, as stated, can be experienced as a mystical revelation of linguistic content, light, or speech. Alternatively, mystical content may be drawn into the mundane realm as a 'magical' instrument used to change history and affect physical reality. The Anonymous Commentator in fact testifies that he personally witnessed an individual achieving an angelic revelation by using this technique:

And the ministering angels rushing to execute God's will are countless and they fly in space from every side and every corner. And no man is granted permission to see them unless they come to him on a specific mission as in the case of Abraham (Genesis 18 2) [...] And I can testify that I was sitting and learning with an individual who was granted such permission, thus two angels came to him and granted him secrets concerning the future, and indeed after a short while I witnessed the truth that they predicted...<sup>124</sup>

This description of revelation in angelic form is reminiscent of the revelations described by Abraham Abulafia, in whose writings we find descriptions of divine letters being revealed on some occasions in the form of secret-revealing angels.<sup>125</sup>

When practicing the letter permutation technique, the liturgical agent must concentrate on the correct alphabet and he must choose the proper letters for manipulation from that alphabet. Selection of the appropriate alphabet and letters is a condition for effective execution of the prayer ritual and achievement of this-worldly results. The Anonymous Commentator states: "One who knows the right name for each of the different needs mentioned during the prayer can ask for his needs during these benedictions according to his wishes."<sup>126</sup> Certain portions

<sup>124</sup> *Commentary*, Afterman Edition, p. 285. For a detailed analysis of the ecstatic experience see Afterman, *The Intention of Prayers*, pp. 107, 194-198.

<sup>125</sup> See Moshe Idel, *The Mystical Experience hin Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 86-100; Moshe Idel, *Enchanted Chains*, pp. 97-102. Afterman, *The Intention of Prayers*, pp. 194-198.

<sup>126</sup> *Commentary*, Afterman Edition, p. 286.

of the liturgy are considered by the Anonymous Commentator to be the proper points at which to influence the inner dynamics of the divine alphabets. These portions include, for example, the sections that praise God and invoke God's glory; the act of praise thus induces the drawing of blessings from the higher parts of the godhead into the lower. Other sections of the liturgy that include concrete requests concerning mundane affairs are interpreted as magical sequences. By applying the appropriate manipulation of letters, these sequences can be used to draw specific types of mystical influence 'down' into the human world and, in that way, to fulfill the concrete and specific needs specified in the semantic meaning of the relevant prayers.<sup>127</sup>

This is the complete intention (*kavannah*) when the blessing flows from its source, the first and highest alphabet, towards the specific letter of the lower alphabets that the specific matter we are praying for is correlated to. And then the benefit will flow to the man from those specific [lower] letters of the three lower alphabets. And this is the secret of the benediction:

Man should always set his attention on the divine matters or on the purpose of comprehending the [Divine] names and the Mystical secrets- thus he should set his attention towards the letters of the two first and higher alphabets, to the specific letter on those alphabets that the matter is correlated to. However if the matter that concerns the man is constituted of the lower two alphabets he should set his attention towards those two lower alphabets. And if he is asking for mundane matters that are made out of form and matter he should focus his mind on the relevant letters from the third and lowest alphabet [...] and if he is concerned with matters that are constituted of the three lower alphabets he should combine his attention on all of the three alphabets [...] and all the three lower alphabets are considered to be one name, essentially one name of 22 letters, and they all have one source and they all have one source of emanations above...<sup>128</sup>

While 'working on' a part of the liturgy that is concerned with praising God, one should manipulate—in accordance with the relevant charts—letters from the higher alphabets. On the other hand, when 'working on' a section associated with the fulfillment of mundane needs, such as the 12 'middle benedictions' in the traditional *Amidah* prayer, one should manipulate letters from the lowest alphabet. If the technique is performed through the higher realm of the godhead, then the 'matter' drawn down into the human mind is translated into linguistic content manifested as higher secrets. If the kabbalist draws on the second alphabet, he may experience a mystical conjunction with the divine light that constitutes the

127 Afterman, *The Intention of Prayers*, pp. 189-193.

128 *Commentary*, Afterman Edition, pp. 230-231 and p. 258; Afterman, *The Intention of Prayers*, pp. 93-94.

higher levels of the godhead.<sup>129</sup> If the monadic essence is drawn into the semantic layers of the human mind, it might materialize as an inner speech or as an angelic revelation of ideas and secrets.<sup>130</sup> If the technique is focused on the lower alphabet, the power drawn into the mind will be concrete in character, answering specific, concrete questions. The power drawn from the lower alphabets would thus tend to consist more of information relating to this-worldly, mundane affairs, sometimes transmitted through an 'angel' intermediary.

## IX: Ecstatic Voices of Prayer

Moshe Idel has analyzed the importance of the vocal element in the performance of the Jewish rituals and in the study of Torah.<sup>131</sup> One of the prominent features of the Linguistic-Ecstatic model of Kabbalah is the strong connection between linguistic technique and linguistic revelation. The practice of praying using a linguistic-mystical *kavannah* technique was thought to have the potential to induce an ecstatic experience, often involving the receiving of messages through 'inner speech.' The manipulated letters were thought to have the capacity to transmit, through the channels of letters, these voices from the divine to the human realm.<sup>132</sup>

The Anonymous Commentator writes about a particular stage toward the end of the liturgical prayer, known as the *Nefilath Apayim* (literally, 'falling on the face'). During the *Nefilath Apayim*, the worshiper bows down, and at this point in the liturgy, may add a personal prayer. The drama of 'falling down' indicated to the author that this is the precise moment in the liturgical ceremony that the ecstatic experience might occur. The prayer thus climaxes in an ecstatic experience that resembles some of the prophetic experiences described in the Bible, in which prophets were driven to bring their faces to the floor as a result of an overwhelming ecstatic experience.<sup>133</sup> Some believe that this 'falling down' was in fact part of an active technique, used to induce the ecstatic experience. Like the prophets, then, the kabbalist falls on his face in order to be able to receive the powerful ecstatic content that he drew from the metaphysical letters in the earlier stages of the prayer. The same energy now "explodes" in

129 The second alphabet is referred to by the name 'Ancient Light,' and by cleaving to that light the soul "cleaves to the bright light and receives the holy spiritual power." *Commentary*, Afterman Edition, p. 256.

130 See Afterman, *The Intention of Prayers*, pp. 106-108.

131 Moshe Idel, 'The Voiced Text of the Torah,' *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift Fur Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 68 (1994), pp. 145-166; Idel, *Enchanted Chains*, pp. 196-211; Idel, 'Reification of Language in Jewish Mysticism,' *Mysticism and Language*, ed. S. Katz, New York 1992, pp. 52-53; Idel, *Hasidism*, pp. 147, 160-170; Scholem, 'The Name of God', pp. 186-188.

132 See Afterman, *The Intention of Prayers*, pp. 112-113, 180-181, and 196-197.

133 See Haviva Pedy, *Vision and Speech*, pp. 47-90.

the kabbalist's mind in different forms: it may be realized in angelic form or, alternatively, it might manifest itself as inner, ecstatic speech without any physical representation:

The second matter related to '*Nefilath Apayim*' is the matter of blocking one's eyes from looking at mundane matters during the prophetic experience and thus disturbing the inner voice whose speech is heard from inside, since it is possible to hear the inner voice without having a vision of the source of the voice<sup>134</sup>, a voice revealing secrets and answering your questions. And this esoteric matter transcends human comprehension and understanding, allowing only those that were granted from above the capacity to experience such ecstatic matters. It is impossible to provide any analysis of these matters [...] and I know only of a few men that experienced these kinds of revelations (alluding to the angelic revelation described earlier).<sup>135</sup>

We can thus see that prayer, in the Anonymous Commentator's scheme, is the context not only of the mystical technique, but also of the ecstatic experience that results from the use of that technique. The ecstatic experience is undergone during the final sections of the prayer, while the earlier parts of the prayer are dedicated to the build-up of ecstatic energy that is drawn down from above and finally 'realized' at the end of the prayer. In the earlier stages of the prayer, then, the worshiper is drawing energy for fulfilling theurgist and magical ends, but ultimately also with the aim of producing an ecstatic experience. Another possibility in the Anonymous Commentator's model is the receiving of 'answers' at a later point as part of a dream; this notion was further developed in later Ecstatic Kabbalah.<sup>136</sup>

## X: Prayer and Ecstasy in Later Kabbalah

The Anonymous Commentary is the first source in the history of Kabbalah to make use of letter permutation as a *kavannah* technique during prayer. The use of letter permutation techniques as a device for achieving ecstasy and inducing divine revelation was, however, a common theme. Such techniques were important, for example, in the Ecstatic Kabbalah developed by Abraham Abulafia and by the 14<sup>th</sup> Century kabbalist, Yitzhak from Acre.<sup>137</sup> The latter kabbalist was influenced by Natan ben Sa'adyah Har'ar, the author of the ecstatic kabbalistic treatise, *Sha'arei Tzedek*, and a student of Abulafia who gave personal testimony to the efficacy of

134 Like in the case of an angelic revelation discussed earlier.

135 *Commentary*, Afterman Edition, p. 286.

136 See Moshe Idel, *Nocturnal Kabbalists*, Jerusalem 2006, (Hebrew), pp. 15-36, 109-116. See also the earlier version in English, 'Nocturnal Kabbalists', *Archives* 4 (2000), pp. 49-74.

137 Moshe Idel, *Nocturnal Kabbalists*, (Hebrew) pp. 20-23.

techniques of letter permutation.<sup>138</sup> Letter permutation techniques continued to be important in 16<sup>th</sup> Century Kabbalah,<sup>139</sup> and in *Hasidism*.<sup>140</sup> Examples of ecstatic techniques, sometimes tied to *halakhic* practice and liturgical prayer, are common in the later kabbalistic sources of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century and can be found in the writings of Eliezer Azikri,<sup>141</sup> Joseph Karo, Moses Cordovero<sup>142</sup>, and Hayim Vital.<sup>143</sup>

In his comprehensive study of 18<sup>th</sup> Century Hasidism, Moshe Idel analyzes one of its important kabbalistic sources: Moses Cordovero's synthesis between talismanic forms of prayer and ecstatic techniques involving permutation of letters.<sup>144</sup>

Idel concluded that "at the end of the fifteenth or very beginning of the sixteenth century a clear conception of letters as talismanic objects, which can be traced to works that deal with permutations of letters from Abulafia's school, was in existence; in some of these texts an allusion or direct mention of prayer in notable".<sup>145</sup>

In his book, *Pardes Rimmonim*, Cordovero describes several letter permutation techniques that are used as part of the *kavannah* during prayer. He states: "a prayer using *Kavannah* must draw the spiritual force from the supernal levels downwards unto the letters he is pronouncing so as to be able to elevate these letters to that supernal level, in order to hasten his request."<sup>146</sup> Although I have not been able to find evidence that Cordovero knew the Anonymous Commentary, it does seem to be the case that the Anonymous Commentary is one of the earlier sources of Cordovero's synthesis.<sup>147</sup> Jewish mystics who were influenced by Ecstatic Kabbalah, including those influenced directly by Abraham Abulafia, usually preferred to develop in their own teachings elements of a 'nomian' kind of Ecstatic Kabbalah. In several instances they grounded their ecstatic techniques and experiences in the performance of the *mitzvot* and especially the act of prayer.<sup>148</sup> For instance, the 16<sup>th</sup> Century kabbalist, Hayim Vital, presents a 'nomian' technique practiced during prayer that can induce an ecstatic experience during the act of prayer:

The Secret of Prophecy is certainly a voice sent from above to speak to this Prophet, and the Holy Spirit is likewise in this manner. However, because the voice is supernal and spiritual, it is impossible for it to be made corporeal and enter the ears of the prophet, unless it is first embodied, in that same physical voice that

138 See Moshe Idel, *Natan ben Saadya Har'ar: Le Porte Della Giustizia-Saare Sedeq*, Milan 2001.

139 R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, *Joseph Karo: Lawyer and Mystic*, London 1962, pp. 38-39.

140 Moshe Idel, *Hasidism*, pp. 56-57.

141 Werblowsky, *Joseph Karo*, pp. 63-65.

142 Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, p. 370-376.

143 Idel, *Enchanted Chains*, pp. 58-59; Werblowsky, *Joseph Karo*, pp. 66-80.

144 Idel, *Hasidism*, pp. 154-170.

145 Idel, *Hasidism*, p. 158.

146 Moses Cordovero, *Pardes Rimmonim*, Gate 32, ch. 3, fol 79a. Translated and quoted by Moshe Idel, *Enchanted Chains*, p. 183.

147 Idel, *Hasidism*, p. 339, note 52 and p. 350, Note 123; Afterman, *The Intention of Prayers*, pp. 66-67, 108.

148 See Moshe Idel, *Hasidism*, pp. 103-145; Moshe Idel, *Enchanted chains*, pp. 180-188, 196-202.

emerged from the prophet while engaged in [the study of the] Torah and prayer and the like. It then embodies itself in it and is connected to it and comes to the ears of the prophet, so that he hears. But without the human voice it cannot exist... that selfsame supernal voice comes and is embodied within his voice.<sup>149</sup>

Vital claims that the secret of the prophecy is received during prayer and Torah studying. While the prophet is praying, the divine voice is embodied in the human voice and in that way the prophet undergoes the prophetic experience. In suggesting this, Vital may have had in mind the important work of the 14<sup>th</sup> Century *halakhic* authority, Jacob ben Asher, who was influenced by Yitzhak from Acre and by Yona Hasid of Gerona,<sup>150</sup> and who wrote the following about the prayer of the *Hasidim Ha-Rishonim* of the *Mishna*:

They used to concentrate their minds and use *kavannah* in prayer in order to reach an ecstatic state of '*Hitpashtuth Ha-Gashmiuth*', meaning that their spiritual dimension left their material body and their noetic spirit was empowered up to the point that they were close to prophecy...<sup>151</sup>

According to this interpretation of the purpose of the prayer, the *kavannah* practiced by ancient holy men involved a technique for achieving ecstatic experiences which were understood as a form of prophecy. As Moshe Idel has demonstrated, this kind of synthesis between ecstatic experience and liturgical prayer continued to be central in later developments in Jewish Mysticism, up until and including the emergence of Hasidism in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century.<sup>152</sup> *Rat. Con eliquip ismolore deliquat amconse quisi.*

*Vulputem et ad dolore ming eugait la consecete te facilis nons adionsequat, ver si.*

*Si eui te vel iusting eugiat, quat utem autpatum quat, sim verciliquis ercincin hent utatio odolutat vullutpat. Ut lortis eros nim esed ming exer summolo recip eumsand recipsum iure feuis ese minisisci tet, vel ut lametum ad dio corem dipsum quat.*

*Tat nulla con hent lamet, quat vel irit ulputpatis nulla accum in henit nos am, si.*

*Od magnit ectem duis eugiat nonsequat lortie velessequam iusto del irit irit incilla corem augiamc onsenis ad digna faci tet utat. Tat ut lutpat, vendigna feumsan henibh essit aut ulla commodo lortin vulla adiam, cor sum zzrit ver illa faci tiscidunt venim dolore te modiat. Ut acilisisit ing ercillutat lan vel ea feu faci te faccum ero con vercilla consed digna feuis diam, sequisit am delis er ad min vulla*

149 Sefer Ha-Gilgulim, Vilna 1866, fol. 60a-b. Translated and quoted in Moshe Idel, *Enchanted Chains*, p. 198; Werblowsky, *Joseph Karo*, p. 70.

150 See Werblowsky, *Joseph Karo*, pp. 61-62, p. 64 note 1; Moshe Idel, *Natan ben Saadya Har'ar: Le Porte Della Giustizia-Saare Sedeq*, pp. 300-301.

151 R. Jacob ben Asher, *Arbaah Turim, Orach Hyyim, Hilkhot Tefillah*, 98; Idel, *Hasidism*, pp. 64-65.

152 Idel, *Hasidism*, pp. 103-145; Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, pp. 377-389.

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FELICIA WALDMAN

# Edenic Paradise and Paradisal Eden Moshe Idel's Reading of the Talmudic Legend of the Four Sages who Entered the Pardes

**Abstract:**

Of the stories describing the adventures full of deep significances of the various rabbis from the glorious Talmudic era, the most famous but also the most exploited is undoubtedly that of the "four sages who entered the Pardes". If in the Talmudic-Midrashic literature it was used to point out the dangers and achievements that were related to speculations, rather than experiences, and in the mystical literature it was used to point out the dangers that could befall the mystic on his way to God, to the kabbalists, Pardes was an unexplained parable for an unrevealed secret, a generalized metaphor for the danger zones of religious experience, seen as something which was good for the few, but pernicious for others. This article traces the manner in which Moshe Idel analyzes, in his books and lectures, the meanings of this legend, taking the reader on a fascinating journey in time and space, throughout various types of kabbalistic thinking and even maimonidean philosophy.

*Motto:*

*"We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time."  
T.S.Eliot, Little Gidding*

## Pardes in Jewish mysticism in Moshe Idel's works

Of the stories describing the adventures full of deep significances of the various rabbis from the glorious Talmudic era, the most famous but also the most exploited is undoubtedly that of the "four sages who entered the Pardes". Like most such stories, although backed by the Talmud's authority, this account is not, and must not be, by any means, mistaken for a historical truth, even though the four characters did exist at approximately the same time and their esoteric preoccupations were real, thus providing the basis of the story. It is rather a collection of rabbinical traditions about the effects of taking the mystical path, describing types of experiences and possible outcomes, which give the text an exemplary character.

So Rabbi Akiva, Ben Azzai, Ben Zoma and Elisha ben Abuyah (Aher) entered the Pardes. One peeked and died, another peeked and was injured, the third peeked and chopped down the plants [i.e. he became mad and allured the youth]. Only Rabbi Akiva went up and came down safely. The text appears in *Tosefta Hagigah* 2:3-4 and is completed by another parable: it may be considered that the four travel on a main thoroughfare that passes between two paths: one of fire and one of snow. If one of them leans to one side, he will be burned by the fire, if he leans to the other side, he will be burned by the snow; the fire symbolism is thus extended, paradoxically, to the snow, which may therefore "burn". To safely reach the destination they only need to keep the straight road and not let themselves be drawn to any other direction. The adventure had two positive outcomes. Ben Azzai peeked and died remaining loyal and Rabbi Akiva peeked and came out safely. It also had two negative outcomes: Ben Zoma peeked and lost his mind and Elisha peeked and became a heretic.

As Moshe Idel showed in a lecture held at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 1991 under the title *Primordial Wisdom: The Philosopher's Quest* (available online at <http://www.kheper.net/topics/Kabbalah/Idel/lecture1.htm>) in time the text was used to reveal the most varied significances, its interpretation depending largely on the context. If in the Talmudic-Midrashic literature it was used to point out the dangers and achievements that were related to speculations, rather than experiences, and in the mystical literature it was used to point out the dangers that could befall the mystic on his way to God, to the kabbalists Pardes was an unexplained parable for an unrevealed secret. The freedom of maneuver in the interpretation process that this outlook allows is evident. Pardes thus became a generalized metaphor for the danger zones of religious experience, seen as something which was good for the few, but pernicious for others.

To better understand the significances found by the kabbalists in this parable we must first refer to the pun behind the name of Pardes. In Hebrew “pardes” means orchard, while the notion of Heaven is rendered by the phrase Gan Eden (Garden of Eden). However, when the Tanach was translated into Greek, the translators used the word Paradise (deriving from the Persian *Paradesha*), from which there was a backward linkage to the Hebrew word “pardes”. Thus, the notions of Pardes and Gan Eden, originally different, came to explain or amplify each other. The dangers associated with Gan Eden [the angel with the flaming sword] were transferred upon the Pardes and the dangers associated with the Pardes were transferred upon Gan Eden: both came to represent dangerous ideals and idea dangers. The Pardes story thus became the story of Paradise. It became a common effort of medieval commentators to explain what happened in Paradise by means of the Pardes story. But the connection operated in the opposite sense as well. Entering the Pardes became one and the same thing with entering Paradise, i.e. returning to the primordial place and implicitly to the original state. At this point we should recall the kabbalists’ preoccupation to restore the initial order, to complete the *Tikkun Olam* and also the *Tikkun Nephesh*.

Not surprisingly the pun between Pardes with the literal meaning of Paradise (in the sense of both orchard and heaven) and PaRDeS as the collection of the initials of the words *Peshat* (literal meaning), *Remes* (allegorical meaning), *Derash* (homiletic meaning) and *Sod* (mystical meaning), designating the four level reading of the sacred text, so dear to Rabbi Moses de Leon, an important figure of the Kabbalah, with a big finger in the Zoharic pie (according to Gershom Scholem, it seems that Moses de Leon was the first to provide a kabbalistic analysis of the text, in a book with this very title – *Pardes* – written before 1290, later to be lost [Scholem 1996, 67]), gave birth to a long tradition of interpretations in Jewish mysticism and not only.

The pun is important because, as Moshe Idel shows (Idel, Polirom 2004, 451), in Judaism hermeneutics is a crucial component of the mystical experience. Of the many types of exegeses of the sacred text available, PaRDeS was the dearest to the kabbalists, as it gave their teachings the privileged status of a higher type of knowledge. Furthermore, it must be noted that PaRDeS was not a random combination of four different methods but a coherent system which made integrated use of all their elements. At the same time, even this “improved” type of exegesis had a relatively conservative nature, as it preserved the traditional interpretations, which it regarded as “inferior” but still integrated into what kabbalists considered to be the bigger picture.

Another pun worth mentioning in this context, quoted by Moshe Idel in his book “Absorbing Perfections” (Idel, Polirom 2004, 454), refers to the explanation given by Rabbi Haim Yosef David Azulay (who lived between 1724-1806 in Eretz

Israel) that he who believes in the literal sense of the Bible only is a fool, as proven by the very permutation of the consonants of the word *peshat*: *tipesh*. Moreover, without the last letter, (s), *pardes* becomes *pered*, stupid. Not by chance from the four sages who entered the Pardes only Rabbi Akiva, who corresponds to the kabbalistic (*sod*) level of interpretation, came out safely. This seems to imply that for the kabbalists this was the least dangerous type of exegesis, while the other three involved various perils. Still, it must not be inferred that this was a recommendation for the mass use of kabbalistic methods, but on the contrary, a warning in regard to their elitist nature. The kabbalistic way may have been the most secure, but getting there implied dangers that should not have been overlooked. As Moshe Idel puts it (in *Primordial Wisdom: The Philosopher's Quest*), "there is danger, but Judaism is seen as trying to cope with the problem of the dangerous ideal. The ideal may be dangerous, but it is to be cultivated. This formulation becomes a way of balancing ritualistic approaches against the explosion of metaphysical speculations that might endanger the observance of the ritual".

An additional significance of Pardes is related to the correspondence established between the four levels of interpretation and the four worlds of the creation process in Lurianic kabbalah. According to this outlook, *peshat* corresponds to *Asiyah*, the world of action, *remes* to *Yetsirah*, the world of formation, *derash* to *Beriyah*, the world of creation and *sod* to *Atzilut*, the world of emanation. Naturally, the omission of one of Torah's senses leads to a failure or malfunction at the corresponding cosmic level. This shows once again how important it was for the kabbalist to go through ALL the four levels of interpretation, which means that the Pardes system of exegesis was conceived like a ladder, or, as Idel calls it, a *scala mentis ad Deum* (Idel, Polirom 2004, 455). In this outlook, the hermeneutical reading of the Torah was the way to the divine: by progressively immersing in the depths of the sacred text, at the core of which laid one of God's manifestations, the mystic thought he could understand the dynamics of the celestial realm and thus literally experience the divine. Such exegesis was not just a method to find new significances in the Torah but sometimes the very aim of the kabbalist's endeavor: to meet the ultimate reality.

## Interpretations of the Pardes legend in Moshe Idel's works

In his lecture on *Primordial Wisdom: The Philosopher's Quest* Idel underlines that to Maimonides (Moses ben Maimon, Rambam, 1135-1204, who lived in Spain,

Morocco, Eretz Israel and Egypt) the wisdom of Adam was perfect philosophy, which was lost but could be retrieved under certain circumstances by some outstanding masters, like Rabbi Akiva. In this outlook, to be in Paradise is to be a philosopher. Philosophy is seen as perfection in the present; Paradise as perfection in the past and in the future. The ideal of philosophy is therefore to exist in continuous contemplation and as a result the Fall is interpreted as man's inability to stay in the state of perfect philosophy. The Pardes story, however, seems to point out a path of return, and to suggest a view of Judaism as a project of return to perfect philosophy, showing both techniques and possible problems. As such the Pardes is linked to speculation: it is something to be known, something that must be grasped clearly, rather than a mystical experience. Maimonides even states that it is not proper to walk in the Pardes without being filled with bread and meat, i.e., without having had a solid Rabbinic education which implies knowledge of what is permitted and forbidden, because this gives composure to the mind. In Maimonides' view, Jewish law is a way of achieving certain stability, a mastery of lust and imagination.

Starting from Maimonides' philosophical interpretation, Abraham Abulafia (1240-1291, born in Spain), the best known representative of ecstatic Kabbalah, who actually devised not four, but seven levels of reading the sacred text (Idel, Polirom 2004, 453), developed the thesis that the state of the Primordial Man is always accessible to us, always available at any time – as, too, is the sin of Adam. From this perspective it may be stated that we all are constantly in Paradise, whether we realize it or not. Neither the Expulsion nor the Paradisal state are seen as historical events but rather as structures of experience open to each of us. By studying and obeying Torah, these typical experiences and states may be actualized at any moment. History becomes irrelevant. Nevertheless, this does not mean that anyone can undertake such enterprise. This outlook does not rule out danger, which continues to lurk, like in all the other approaches. It is rather an attempt to balance ritualistic approaches against the explosion of metaphysical speculations that might endanger the observance of the ritual in rabbinic Judaism. (Incidentally it should be noted that, as Moshe Idel shows [Idel 2000, 272-300], Abraham Abulafia thought that the curse in the literal sense was blessing in the hidden sense and the curse in the hidden sense was blessing in the literal one, granting negative, even demonic, connotations to the latter. To him (and others like him), the literal meaning remained the patrimony of the many and the esoteric one the patrimony of the chosen few).

The kabbalistic interpretation of the Pardes did not stop here. As Moshe Idel argues (in a second lecture held at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 1991 under the title *Primordial Light: The Ecstatic's Quest*, available online at <http://www.kheper.net/topics/Kabbalah/Idel/lecture2.htm>), the kabbalists were less interested in establishing a unified theology than they were in finding secret interpretations

that would attract many different kinds of people. Their intention was not so much to involve the masses in mystical speculations, but to allow for diversity among the elite. That is why, at the beginning of the 13th century, an interesting shift occurred in the view of a number of kabbalists, for whom the central figure of the parable was no longer Rabbi Akiva but Ben Azzai, the Talmudic master who died. This outlook was based on perceiving the Pardes not as a matter (game?) of intellect, but as an experience of the supreme light. The interpretation does not refer to an intellectual or conceptual light, but to an experiential light and it starts from the Midrashic texts in which Adam is described as an entity of Light and as having garments of Light, which were lost after his expulsion from Eden. In this tradition, Adam's basic activity in Heaven was to contemplate the Light, the *Shekhinah*. "The Light of the Shekhinah" is a key term in these texts, for both Paradise and Pardes are seen as full of light. The essential element that Adam loses with the Fall is the possibility to contemplate (experience) this Light. Therefore the restoration of the Adamic state through the ability to contemplate the Light becomes the very purpose of the mystic's experience.

Evidently, this outlook is particularly applicable to ecstatic – *Merkabah* – mysticism. Read from this perspective the text would sound like this: *"Ben Azzai peeked and died. He gazed at the radiance of the Divine Presence like a man with weak eyes who gazes at the full light of the sun and becomes blinded by the intensity of the light that overwhelms him... He did no wish to be separated, he remained hidden in it, his soul was covered and adorned... he remained where he had cleaved, in the Light to which no one may cling and yet live"* (approximate quotation from a manuscript of an unknown author analyzed by Moshe Idel in the above-mentioned lecture). Obviously, this portrays a radical change in the reference point. The mystic no longer contemplates the Divine Chariot or Throne but the radiance of God (*Tzvi ha-Shekhinah*), a light so strong that no one can bear it and whose vision is therefore fatal. The term "overwhelming" is crucial to this reading of the text. If in ancient literature the mystic's aim was to contemplate the divine aspects from a distance, now, for the first time, appears expounded in indubitable terms the desire to cleave to the Radiance of the Shekhinah by entering and becoming a part of the Divine realm, in order to enjoy the divine without interruption (Moshe Idel underlines the fact that since in the union process with the *Shekhinah* we are dealing with the female aspect of God, the language of desire ("sweet radiance", etc.) gives the experience erotic overtones [Idel Hasefer 2004, 8]).

In this context, the death of Ben Azzai, translated by his not coming back and being "hidden away in the place of his cleaving", like all the pious ones whose souls are separated by death from all concerns with the mundane world, turns from an accident into an achievement. Idel identifies here a threefold structure: via purgativa (separation from all concerns of the lowly world), via illuminativa and via unitiva and notes (in his lecture on *The Primordial Light: The Ecstatic's Quest*) the

presence of the influence of a Neo-platonic Christian or even pagan mysticism. This reading of the text is backed up by another writing of an unknown author of the 13th century, which emphasizes its mystical nuance: Ben Azzai died because of the cleaving of his soul out of a great love, his soul didn't return because he reached a great attainment – complete union. His soul and the Light became one, the abyss between man and God disappeared through *unio mystica*. This interpretation is just another proof of the Neo-platonic influence on Jewish thought: many kabbalists used the metaphor of “death by kiss” to express the ultimate union with the divine through *devekut*, which resulted in a cataleptic state of the body (Idel, Polirom 2004, 76). Here it is interesting to note what one of Abraham Abulafia's anonymous disciples wrote in his book *Sefer Ner Elohim*: “He commanded us to keep silent and not speak too much about them [the Sefirot], and put an intellectual limit to our thoughts and balance our desire of love for God, so that our soul should not get separated from our body in its great desire, and seek His lips, which pour wisdom and love” (quoted by Idel, Polirom 2004, 208).

But the importance of the text is not reduced to these speculative aspects. The Talmudic Pardes is also used as a model to which medieval mystics compare their own experiences, thus acquiring the values of a practical recipe. In another anonymous text written in Galilee around the year 1290, the author describes in a magnetic metaphor the manner in which the Divine Light attracts the Light of the Soul, “Which is weak in relation to the Divine Light”. As Moshe Idel shows, the kabbalist has this vision as a result of letter combination techniques and seeks in the Pardes explanations to clarify his own experience. The death of Ben Azzai thus becomes an example worth following or even a desideratum. Here we find once again the concept of initiatory death regarded as the ultimate and supreme experience. The kabbalists tried to develop special techniques designed to help them reach the pre-fall state of the Primordial Man, enter again the radiance of the *Shekhinah* and even a certain erotic relationship with the Divine Presence. By letter combinations, unifications and reversals of letters they invoke the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil and the 10 *Sefirot* and they meditate together so that they may watch each other and see to what extent the encounter with the divine radiance makes them radiate, in their turn, the light (the image can be found in the Torah [Exodus 34:35] where it is written: “*And the children of Israel saw the face of Moses, that the skin of Moses' face shone*”). This expectation of a corporeally observable radiance best evidences the difference between philosophy and mysticism: for Maimonides the experience of the Pardes was mental, with no outward sign, for the kabbalists it was corporeal and visible; for Maimonides God was an intellect, for the kabbalists God was radiance; for Maimonides Adam was a perfect intellect, for the kabbalists Adam was a creature of Light; for Maimonides Paradise and Pardes were intellectual (cerebral) states, for the kabbalists they were corporeal, sensuous, erotic, sexual and an object for practical striving; Maimonides

had no clear method, the kabbalists developed an entire series of techniques. All these prove that far from being a tradition of mystical speculations, Kabbalah was actually one of the purest forms of mysticism, in which extreme types of experience were sought out and considered positive.

In its turn, the theosophical and theurgical Kabbalah proposes a different approach. If in ecstatic mysticism the mystical experience takes place in the mystic's inner self and does not affect the divine realm, in the theosophical and in the theurgical one the effect on the non-human realms is deep. In the theosophical paradigm, the Divine is not a simple entity, but a system of divine powers, and the mystic's entry into the Pardes influences the relationships between these divine powers. In the theurgical paradigm, this interaction involves a struggle with the demonic realm. Although seemingly different, the demonic and the divine share a common anthropomorphic structure. The *Sefirot* are prototypes for both realms. Therefore the mystic's intervention aims either at inducing harmony in the Divine world or at combating some aspect of the demonic world. From this perspective, too, the Pardes represents a danger zone, an aspect of these realms that is too strong for most mortals. Here, however, the accent falls on what happened to Elisha ben Abuyah, the heretical character who "peeked and chopped the plants". The explanation in this case would be that he was unable to understand appropriately either the divine or the demonic world.

This view is based on a kabbalistic thesis developed around the beginning of the 13th century, which claimed that the knowledge of the structure of the demonic is the most profound form of Kabbalah, the most recondite. The adepts of this line wrote long lists of evil angels and described the relationships between the demonic and the divine. This tradition, whose representative were, among others, the Kohen brothers (Isaac and Jacob) and later Moses of Leon, held that it was a religious duty to know, and pursue knowledge of, the demonic world so that one would not be immersed in it. Only by knowing the evil and distinguishing it from the good can one keep it away and truly worship God. Not by chance the parable recorded the figure of Elisha ben Abuyah under the name of Aher (the other), as a direct reference to *Sitra Ahra* (the other side), the realm of evil. As relevant is the sexual implication of the experience's result for Elisha – the sin of being attracted to the demonic realm is translated, in Idel's opinion, by his sexual relation with its figures (the long line of such sins includes Adam's seduction by Lilith, Solomon's 1000 wives, seen as manifestations of the demonic powers used in the King's occult experiences, and Balaam's physical relation with his ass). Sexual attraction, then, becomes an explanation of the power of the Pardes, which the mystic must understand but not be seduced by, and immersed in. Here we should recall that the real (historical) Rabbi Akiva was convinced that the perfect union between husband and wife, when carried out in keeping with the Jewish ritual, was charged with theurgical significance (Idel,

Hasefer 2004, 72) while the real (historical) Ben Azzai refused to get married in order to be able to dedicate himself exclusively to the study of the Torah, thus failing, even though he remained loyal (Idel, Hasefer 2004, 73).

Evidently, the sexual explanation of Elisha's mishap is not the only one possible. Based on his own research on certain quotations from the Talmud, Ioan Petru Culianu concludes, in his turn, that a possible interpretation of Elisha's adventure is related to the legend of Enoch. Turned into God's scribe and registrar under the name of Metatron, Enoch preserves a human quality that is not to be found with the other angels – having joints, he can sit. In this capacity, he may be seen by any mystic on his way to the Throne of Glory, in the sixth *heikhal*.

Thus, in Culianu's view, when Elisha rises to the heavens and sees Metatron sitting on a brilliant throne he mistakes him for God Himself and becomes a dietist saying "perhaps – may God forgive me! – there are two Powers" (Culianu 1998, 75). On the other hand, however, the same Culianu, concludes (in both Culianu 1998, 165, and Culianu 1994, 164) that all the three mystics to whom entry into Paradise was ill-fated (and it is strange to see that Culianu applies this explanation to all the THREE mystics, since Elisha is thus in the position to have actually been allowed TWO mistakes) actually came across the "water danger", which the *Hekhalot Rabbati* places in the sixth "palace" (as Culianu underlines [in Culianu 1996, 164], water and fire are the two constant great dangers awaiting the mystic on his way to the Throne of Glory). They mistake for water the "pure marble floors" of the heavenly *heikhal*, which look like waves, thus attracting upon themselves God's anger, for He does not tolerate lies and/or false judgment before Him (Babylonian Talmud, Hagigah 14 b). Quoting Johann Maier, Culianu identifies here an allusion to the Temple in Jerusalem, whose walls built of colored marble looked like "sea waves" (Culianu 1998, 162). (The circle thus closed becomes vicious – the mystical image is taken over from the physical reality, which it confirms on the rebound). The attempt to descend into Hell to perform a rite has in most cases a negative end – the man who descends can no longer surface. In a typological approach, the case of Rabbi Akiva, who came out safely from this enterprise because he did not allow himself to be attracted (or distracted from the straight path), becomes a prototype that reflects Abraham's "descent into Egypt", (in mystical literature Egypt is often considered a prototype of the demonic realm), and safe return thereof, Noah's being saved from the flood and all the other (few) such happy-ending stories from Adam onwards. But this interpretation operates on the rebound as well. Thus, Samson's biblical adventure with Delilah is quoted as an entry into the Pardes (the two meet in a vineyard) and turned into an example for the cases with dramatic ending. Moshe Idel quotes a treatise written in early 16th century by Rabbi Joseph Al-Ashqar of Tlemsen, Tzfanat Pa'aneah, in which Samson is

described as a savior, who has to enter the realm of evil, symbolized by Delilah, in order to operate on the divine realm, represented by the Shekhinah (Idel, Hasefer 2004, 324).

On the other hand, for the kabbalists who regarded the Pardes from a theosophical perspective, the essential aim of the mystical experience was to induce or re-induce the harmony in the Divine spheres that had been disturbed by the Adamic sin. They had two metaphors for the Divine: that of the Tree, and (to simplify) the anthropomorphic one of the couple in which the first nine *Sefirot* were the male side and the tenth *Sefira* the female side. From this perspective the basic sin of Aher was to break the connection between the two aspects of the Divine (with the plants representing the last *Sefira*). Applying this symbolism backwards and considering the Pardes in the terms of Garden, it becomes obvious that in Paradise the transgression was not eating the apple, but separating it from the Tree. By separating the fruit from the Tree, Aher (like Adam) separated aspects of the Divine from each other thus disturbing the balance of the Divine realm in an action of the referred to as “the devastation of the plantations”. Moreover, by affecting the Divine realm in this manner one may be inclined to conclude that there are two different powers and come to believe in a Duality, instead of Unity (just like Culianu underlined). The challenge, then, of the mystical experience is to heal this rupture of the primordial times, to restore the lost unity of the divine powers by using the Jewish ritual seen as a theurgical technique, able to influence God. The mystical project is thus transposed into another key, being turned into an attempt to repair the rupture in the Divine (rather than between man and God) induced by human transgression. From this perspective Rabbi Akiva is seen as one who is able to restore the relationship between the last two Sefirot (the ninth and the tenth) through ritualistic acts. This, in Moshe Idel’s view, projected a certain type of sacramental value onto Jewish ritual which was absent in other forms of Kabbalah or in Maimonides (Idel, *Pardes: From Sefirot to Demonology*, third lecture held at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 1991, available online at <http://www.kheper.net/topics/Kabbalah/Idel/lecture3.htm>). Unlike in other traditions, where the individual was the center, in these demonic or *Sefirotic* pursuits the focus is on repairing the cosmos by inducing a harmonious state in all levels.

## Instead of conclusion

Moshe Idel’s analysis of the Pardes story takes the reader through the most diverse types of kabbalistic thinking but also through Maimonidean philosophy. Showing that Maimonides’ aim was not merely to propose philosophy but to

use Aristotelian psychology and metaphysics to point to meditations on secret Judaism, and to introduce a new paradigm for understanding it, Idel underlines that the great thinker was able to begin a tradition of interpretation (which lasted from about the 14th to the 18th centuries) which took ritual as a means of introduction to philosophy, and which was at the same time very close to mysticism. This interpretation fortified the place of ritual, yet put it in its place, showing that it was not final. "It is needed, but in a way to be transcended – by the few, for whom a higher ideal is needed, that of the Pardes" (Idel, *Primordial Wisdom: The Philosopher's Quest*).

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# WARREN ZEV HARVEY

## Idel on Spinoza

### **Abstract:**

In the course of his studies on Kabbalah, Moshe Idel has written on the influence of Kabbalists on philosophy. He suggests that Spinoza was influenced by the Kabbalah regarding his expressions “Deus sive Natura” and “amor Dei intellectualis.” The 13th-century ecstatic Kabbalist Rabbi Abraham Abulafia and many authors after him cited the numerical equivalence of the Hebrew words for God and Nature: *elohim* = *ha-teba`* = 86. This striking numerical equivalence may be one of the sources of Spinoza’s expression “Deus sive Natura.” The same Kabbalist used the Hebrew expression “*ahabah elohit sikhlit*” (“divine intellectual love”), which may underlie Spinoza’s expression “*amor Dei intellectualis*.” Abulafia’s expression “*ahabah elohit sikhlit*” is repeated by the popular 15th-century Maimonidean philosopher, Rabbi Abraham Shalom.

*They call me a heretic and unbeliever because I have worshiped God in truth and not according to the imagination of the people who walk in darkness... I shall not forsake the ways of truth for those of falsehood.*

Abraham Abulafia, *Sefer ha-Ge’ulah*<sup>1</sup>

In the course of his far-reaching studies on the history of Jewish mysticism throughout the ages, Moshe Idel has often addressed himself to the influence of Kabbalistic literature on the philosophic tradition – from the medieval Maimonideans, through Pico della Mirandola and Leone Ebreo, until Franz Rosenzweig and Jacques Derrida. In this connection, he has written two important studies that have touched on the influence of Kabbalistic literature on Spinoza: one having reference to Spinoza’s concept of “*Deus sive Natura*” (*Ethics*, IV, preface and 4 corollary) and the other to his concept of “*amor Dei intellectualis*” (*Ethics*, V, 32-33). In what follows, I wish to summarize Idel’s arguments in these two studies, and then say some words about his approach to Spinoza.

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, New York 1941, pp. 130, 380.

## Deus sive Natura

Idel's contribution to the history of Spinoza's concept "*Deus sive Natura*" is found in his his paper "*Deus sive Natura – The Metamorphosis of a Dictum from Maimonides to Spinoza*."<sup>2</sup> In this paper, Idel focuses on the connection or equivalence in Maimonides and subsequently in Kabbalistic literature between the words "elohim" (= Deus) and "*teba*" (= Natura), and argues that this connection or equivalence is in part behind Spinoza's concept of "*Deus sive Natura*".

Idel begins by noting three striking contexts in which Maimonides associates the biblical word "*elohim*" with nature. First, Maimonides identifies *ma`aseh bereshit*, the secrets of Genesis 1, with physics or natural science, and in Genesis 1 God is named repeatedly and exclusively "*elohim*".<sup>3</sup> Second, Maimonides interprets the biblical phrase "image of God" (*selem elohim*) as referring to the "*natural* form."<sup>4</sup> Third, he explains that the biblical description of the Tables of the Law as "the work of God" (*ma`aseh elohim*) means that they are "*natural* and not artificial."<sup>5</sup> In addition to these three boldly naturalistic interpretations of biblical uses of the word "*elohim*", Maimonides also writes explicitly that the "divine actions" (Ibn Tibbon's Hebrew: *ha-pe`ulot ha-elohiyyot*) are the "natural actions" (Ibn Tibbon's Hebrew: *ha-pe`ulot ha-tib`iyyot*): "If you consider the divine actions, I mean to say the natural actions, God's wily graciousness and wisdom, as shown in the creation of living beings, in the gradation of the motions of the limbs, and of the proximity of some of the latter to others, will through them become clear to you," etc.<sup>6</sup> Idel observes that Maimonides thus saw the divine activity as *natural* with regard to the human intellect ("the divine image"), with regard to the animal body ("God's wily graciousness and wisdom, as shown in the creation of living beings"), and inanimate objects ("the Tables of the Law").<sup>7</sup>

2 In Robert S. Cohen and Hillel Levine, eds., *Maimonides and the Sciences*, Dordrecht 2000, pp. 87-110. The paper was originally delivered in 1987 at the Boston Colloquium for the History and Philosophy of Science, Boston University. It was published first in French in Idel, *Maimonide et la mystique juive*, trans. C. Mopsik, Paris 1991, pp. 105-134.

3 *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines, Chicago 1963, I, introduction, pp. 6-7. Cf. Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkhot Yesode ha-Torah* 4:10. See BT Hagigah 11b-13a. The name "elohim" appears 35 times in the 34 verses describing the seven days of Creation (Genesis 1:1-2:3). All other names of God, including the Tetragrammaton, are absent.

4 *Guide*, I, 1, p. 22. Cf. *Genesis* 1:26-27; 9:6.

5 *Guide*, I, 66, p. 160. Cf. *Exodus* 32:16.

6 *Guide*, III, 32, p. 525. Spinoza read the *Guide* in Rabbi Samuel ibn Tibbon's Hebrew translation. As Idel notes, Pines conjectured that "Spinoza's expression, 'God or Nature'... may have been, at least in part, suggested by this passage of the *Guide*" (ibid., translator's introduction, p. xcvi n. 66). Cf. *Guide*, III, 34, p. 534: "the Law is a divine thing [inyan elohi]... natural things [ha-inyanim ha-tib'iyyim]."

7 "*Deus sive Natura*", pp. 88-89. Cf. pp. 96-97 (on the divine image and natural form) and p. 94 (on the use of "elohim", as opposed to the Tetragrammaton, in the biblical account of Creation). See also Carlos Fraenkel, "Maimonides' God and Spinoza's Deus sive Natura," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 44 (2006), pp. 169-215.

Next Idel observes that the “prophetic” or “ecstatic” Kabbalist Rabbi Abraham Abulafia (1240-1291), who wrote three commentaries on the *Guide* and taught the book and its secrets in Spain, Greece, and Italy, expressed the Maimonidean identity of *elohim* and nature by a remarkable numerical equivalence or *gematria*: the numerical value of the words “*elohim*” and “*ha-teba*” is identical, namely, 86. The first known occurrence of this *gematria* is in Abulafia’s early book, *Get ha-Shemot* (1271). Alluding to the verse, “Then the magicians said unto Pharaoh [after the plague of gnats], ‘This is the finger of God [*elohim*]’” (Exodus 8:15), Abulafia teaches that nature may be changed by virtue of the name “*elohim*”.<sup>8</sup>

Abulafia, Idel continues, returned to this numerical equivalence between “God” and “Nature” in several other works, often with reference to Maimonides’ interpretation of the Tables of the Law in *Guide*, I, 66. For example, in his *Sefer ha-Hesheq* (1289), he explains that the word “*luhot*” (Tables), when transformed according to the *atbash* code (i.e., the first letter of the alphabet corresponds to the last, the second letter to the next-to-last, etc.), becomes “*kisse*” (Throne), and the numerical value of *ha-kisse*’ (the Throne) = *ha-teba*’ (Nature) = *elohim*.<sup>9</sup> Similar ruminations concerning *elohim* = *ha-teba*’ are found in Abulafia’s Commentary on the *Guide*, *Sitre Torah* (1280), on I, 66.<sup>10</sup>

Idel shows that the numerical identification of *elohim* = *ha-teba*’ was cited explicitly or implicitly in many Kabbalistic works after Abulafia; e.g., Rabbi Joseph Gikatilla’s *Ginnat Egoz* and his Commentary on Genesis 1, Rabbi Joseph ben Shalom Ashkenazi’s Commentary on *Genesis Rabbah*, the anonymous *Eshkol ha-Kofer*, Rabbi Meir Aldabi’s *Shebile Emunah*, Rabbi Bahya ben Asher’s Commentary on the Pentateuch, and Rabbi Moses Cordovero’s *Pardes Rimmonim*.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, Idel further shows that the numerical identification of *elohim* = *ha-teba*’ was found even in the Jewish philosophic literature; e.g., the anonymous *Commentary on the Secrets of Ibn Ezra* (attributed wrongly to Rabbi Joseph ibn Kaspi), Rabbi Judah Carasani’s *Aron ha-Edut*, Rabbi Isaac Albalag’s *Tiqqun ha-De’ot*, a radical treatise by an anonymous 15th-century thinker (who interpreted Genesis 2:3, “which God created to make,” as meaning “Nature created from then onward”), Rabbi Abraham ibn Migash’s *Kebed Elohim*, and Rabbi Judah Moscato’s Commentary on Rabbi Judah Halevi’s *Kuzari*.<sup>12</sup>

Spinoza, Idel argues, was influenced by the *gematria* of *elohim* = *ha-teba*’, but he “disentangled the importance of the linguistic proof, the *gematria*” and ignored the “mystical hermeneutics.” He focused on the content: God = Nature.<sup>13</sup>

8 Ibid., p. 90. Idel cites Exodus 31:18, which fits *Guide*, I, 66, but the primary allusion here is to Exodus 8:15.

9 Ibid., p. 92.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid., pp. 93-96.

12 Ibid., pp. 96-98.

13 Ibid., p. 101.

Spinoza may not have been well-read in the Kabbalistic literature, but he was well-read in the Hebrew philosophic literature and particularly that related to Ibn Ezra and Maimonides. He was also well-read in the literature of Jewish biblical commentary. Given the widespread occurrence of the identification of *elohim* and *ha-teba`* in non-Kabbalistic texts, as well as in Kabbalistic ones, Idel's conclusion that Spinoza was aware of the *gematria* is likely.

Idel, however, goes on to ask whether it is possible to locate a particular text that influenced Spinoza regarding the identification of God and Nature. He remarks that the equivalence of *elohim* and *ha-teba`* appears in so many Hebrew books that it is difficult to isolate one source that influenced Spinoza. Nonetheless, he suggests that Spinoza was influenced in particular by Rabbi Joseph Gikatilla's *Ginnat Egoz*. In this book, Gikatilla plays frequently with the equivalence of *elohim* and *ha-teba`*. In addition, Idel comments, Gikatilla also plays with the root *tb`* (the same root as in the noun "*teba`*") in ways that suggest the terms "*natura naturans*" and "*natura naturata*" found occasionally in medieval Latin philosophy (beginning with the 13th century) and significantly in Spinoza (*Ethics*, I, 29, scholium, and 31). One finds in *Ginnat Egoz* various configurations of the words "*teba`*" (*natura*), "*matbia`*" (*naturans*), and "*mutba`*" (*naturata*).<sup>14</sup>

## Amor Dei Intellectualis

Idel's contribution to the clarification of the sources of Spinoza's concept "*amor Dei intellectualis*" is contained in his essay, "The Influence of *Sefer Or ha-Sekhel* on Rabbi Moses Narboni and Rabbi Abraham Shalom."<sup>15</sup> He draws attention in this essay to a Hebrew phrase that closely parallels the Latin "*amor Dei intellectualis*" and is found in a Kabbalistic and a philosophic text.

In this essay, Idel focuses on passages from Rabbi Abraham Abulafia's book *Or ha-Sekhel* (1285) that are paraphrased without attribution by two leading Maimonidean philosophers: Rabbi Moses Narboni (c. 1300-c. 1362) and Rabbi Abraham Shalom (d. 1492). One of these passages, the one paraphrased by Shalom, contains the Hebrew analogue to the Latin "*amor Dei intellectualis*". The passage in question from Abulafia's *Or ha-Sekhel* reads as follows:

As among two lovers love has two parts [i.e., that of each lover] but becomes one thing when consummated, so the Name [i.e., the Tetragrammaton = *yod* (10), *heh* (5), *vav* (6), *heh* (5) = 26] is composed of two parts, which are the conjunction of divine intellectual love [*ahabah elohit sikhlit*] with human

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 102-106.

<sup>15</sup> Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, Albany 1988, pp. 63-71. The essay first appeared in Hebrew in *AJSReview* 4 (1979), Hebrew section, pp. 1-6; reprinted in Idel, *Peraqim ba-Qabbalah ha-Nebu'it*, Jerusalem 1990, pp. 75-83.

intellectual love [*ahabah enoshit sikhlit*] [*ahabah* = *alef* (1), *heh* (5), *bet* (2), *heh* (5) = 13; thus divine *ahabah* + human *ahabah* = 26], and [this conjoined love] is one . Likewise, His Name comprises “one” “one” [“one” = *ehad* = *alef* (1), *het* (8), *dalet* (4) = 13; thus “one” “one” = 26] because the connection of the human existence with the divine existence at the time of cognition, which is equal to the intellect *in existentia*, is such that she [the human lover] and He [the divine Lover] become one entity. This is the power of the human being that he is able to connect the Lower Part with the Upper Whole such that the Lower ascends and cleaves unto the Upper, and the Upper descends and kisses that which ascends toward it, like a bridegroom actively kissing his bride out of the abundance of the true passionate love [*hesheq*], designated for their mutual pleasure, from the power of the Name.<sup>16</sup>

In his philosophic book *Neveh Shalom*, VI, 1, Shalom adapts this Abulafian passage, omitting allusions to *gematria* and demythologizing it noticeably:

This is the power of the human being that he is able to connect the Lower Realm with the Upper such that the Lower ascends and cleaves unto the Upper, and the Upper descends and kisses that which ascends toward it. This is the intent here in the phrase “ascending and descending” [Genesis 28:12]. For the [human] intellects are the [angels] *ascending* from the depths of lowliness by means of the Ladder of Wisdom, and the Separate Intellects are the ones *descending* toward them out of the abundance of the true passionate love [*hesheq*], designated for their mutual pleasure, from the power of God. In this way, the intellectual divine love [*ha-ahabah ha-elohit ha-sikhlit*] joins with intellectual human love [*ahabah enoshit sikhlit*].<sup>17</sup>

In the conclusion of his essay, Idel points out the “linguistic similarity” between Abulafia’s phrase “*ahabah elohit sikhlit*” (divine intellectual love) and Spinoza’s phrase “*amor Dei intellectualis*”.<sup>18</sup> He notes that Abulafia’s phrase refers to God’s love of the human being, while Spinoza’s refers to the human being’s love of God.<sup>19</sup> Nonetheless, he argues that the linguistic similarity is significant because Abulafia and Shalom, like Spinoza after them, associate the love of God with intellectual cognition.

Idel’s conjecture that Spinoza knew Abulafia’s phrase “divine intellectual love” is not improbable. Spinoza almost certainly did not read Abulafia’s *Or ha-Sekhel*, but

16 *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, pp. 66-67. Cf. Idel, *Kabbalah and Eros*, New Haven 2005, pp. 79-80, 277; also 199-200, 307.

17 *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, loc. cit.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 67 and pp. 70-71 n. 18.

19 This is true with regard to the literal meaning of the two phrases in their contexts: Abulafia’s “*ahabah elohit*” refers to love from God and Spinoza’s “*amor Dei*” refers to love for God. However, Abulafia, Shalom, and Spinoza all speak about a two-way intellectual love in which God’s love of human beings and human beings’ love of God are in some sense one. See Spinoza, *Ethics*, V, 36.

he almost certainly did read Shalom's popular philosophic book, *Neveh Shalom*, which was available in two printed editions (Constantinople 1539, Venice 1574).

Spinoza's concept of *amor Dei intellectualis* is indebted to Maimonides' discussion of the "passionate love" (Arabic: *ishq*; Hebrew: *hesheq*) of God in *The Guide of the Perplexed*, III, 51. The passages Idel cites from Narboni and Shalom allude to this chapter of the *Guide*.<sup>20</sup>

## Pan-Abulafianism

Scholars have expounded the conceptual roots of Spinoza's phrases "*Deus sive Natura*" and "*amor Dei intellectualis*" in the Jewish medieval speculative literature.<sup>21</sup> Idel, however, has pointed to linguistic similarities: "*Deus sive Natura*" recalls the Abulafian gematria "*elohim = ha-teba`*" and "*amor Dei intellectualis*" recalls the Abulafian phrase "*ahabah elohit sikhlit*". Idel's linguistic arguments supplement the conceptual similarities and are made more probable by them.

In both cases, Idel has called attention to the possible influence (even if indirect) of Rabbi Abraham Abulafia on Spinoza. Idel wrote his doctoral dissertation and many other studies on Abulafia's "prophetic" or "ecstatic" Kabbalah, and has from the beginning of his career argued for the marked influence of Abulafia on other medieval Kabbalists, on Jewish and Christian Renaissance Kabbalists, on the Kabbalah of Safed, on Sabbateanism, and on Hasidism.<sup>22</sup> Idel's focus on Abulafia was branded as "Pan-Abulafianism" by the Isaiah Tishby, who considered Abulafia's Kabbalah to be a marginal phenomenon.<sup>23</sup>

Idel has remarked on Gershom Scholem's changed attitude toward Abulafia.<sup>24</sup> As a young man, Scholem considered Abulafia to be the most important of the early Kabbalists. In a research report he addressed to the great Hebrew poet Hayyim Nahman Bialik in 1925, he wrote of "Rabbi Abraham Abulafia, the most

20 See my essay, "Ishq, Hesheq, and Amor Dei Intellectualis" (forthcoming in Yirmiyahu Yovel and Aaron Garrett, eds., *Ethica V: Amor Dei Intellectualis, Spinoza on Intuitive Knowledge and Beatitude*, to be published by the Jerusalem Spinoza Institute).

21 See the articles by Fraenkel and me cited above in nn. 7 and 20. Cf. Harry Austryn Wolfson, *Spinoza*, Cambridge, MA, 1934.

22 See Idel, "Abraham Abulafia's Works and Doctrine" (in Hebrew), doctoral dissertation, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1976; *Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, trans. J. Chipman, Albany 1987; *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah* (above, n. 15); *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics in Abraham Abulafia*, Albany 1989; and other studies.

23 See Tishby's critique of Idel (in Hebrew) in *Zion* 54 (1989), pp. 209-222, 469-491, and Idel's responses (in Hebrew), *ibid.*, pp. 223-240, 493-508 (esp. 493-494). Cf. Idel, "The Contribution of Abraham Abulafia's Kabbalah to the Understanding of Jewish Mysticism," in Peter Schäfer and Joseph Dan, eds., *Gershom Scholem's Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism 50 Years After*, Tübingen 1993, pp. 121, 132. Tishby used the term "Pan-Abulafianism" in a comment he made after one of Idel's lectures in the mid-80s.

24 "The Contribution of Abraham Abulafia's Kabbalah," pp. 117-143.

important personality among all the early [Kabbalists] known to us.”<sup>25</sup> In his classic *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, published in 1941, Scholem dedicated the entire Fourth Lecture to “Abraham Abulafia and the Doctrine of Prophetic Kabbalism.”<sup>26</sup> However, after *Major Trends*, he curiously turned his spotlight away from Abulafia, and there is no article on him in his *Kabbalah*, published in 1974.<sup>27</sup> Idel complains that while the early Scholem appreciated the significance of Abulafia, the later Scholem generally neglected him in favor of “a monolithic and mythocentric vision of Kabbalah.”<sup>28</sup> Idel further asserts that the attitude of the later Scholem was followed by most of his leading students, like Tishby, R.J.Z. Werblowsky, and Joseph Dan.<sup>29</sup>

Idel does not try to explain why Scholem changed his approach to Abulafia. I have a suspicion. I think the strong Maimonidean elements in Abulafia’s Kabbalah became increasingly problematic for Scholem, who sharply contrasted the spiritually meaningful Kabbalah with “sterile” Maimonideanism.<sup>30</sup> Abulafia’s Kabbalah exhibits a fascinating integration of radical philosophic intellectualism with imaginative numerical and alphabetical mysticism; and the possibility of such an integration of philosophy and Kabbalah seems to belie Scholem’s sharp contrast between them.

Just as Abulafia was a Kabbalist influenced by philosophers, so too he was a Kabbalist who influenced philosophers. He influenced, for example, Rabbis Isaac Albalag, Moses Narboni, and Abraham Shalom; and, if Idel is right, he influenced also Baruch Spinoza, and influenced him with regard to two major concepts: the identification of God and Nature and the intellectual love of God. In his worst nightmares, I doubt Professor Tishby imagined Idel’s Pan-Abulafianism reaching Spinoza.

Idel’s Spinoza is not a Kabbalist, but a Jewish philosopher influenced by the medieval Hebrew speculative tradition – a tradition in which Rabbi Abraham Abulafia played no mean role. The arguments presented by Idel with regard to the sources of both “*Deus sive Natura*” and “*amor Dei intellectualis*” deserve

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25 Gershom Scholem, *Debarim be-Go*, Tel-Aviv 1975, p. 62. This statement of Scholem’s is quoted in Idel’s doctoral dissertation, p. 1.

26 *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, pp. 119-155.

27 “The Contribution of Abraham Abulafia’s Kabbalah,” pp. 120-121. Cf. *Kabbalah*, New York 1974; but see p. 467, s.v. “Abulafia, Abraham.”

28 “The Contribution of Abraham Abulafia’s Kabbalah,” pp. 117-143; esp. pp. 118-121, 123-124. Idel writes that after *Major Trends*, “Scholem’s interest in the ecstatic Kabbalah radically diminished” (p. 120) and eventually turned into “total neglect” (p. 121).

29 *Ibid.*, pp. 130-136.

30 See *Major Trends*, pp. 11-13, 28-30, 35-36, 38). Cf. my “Two Jewish Approaches to Evil in History,” in Steven T. Katz, ed., *The Impact of the Holocaust on Jewish Theology*, New York 2005, pp. 194-201. Scholem notes Abulafia’s lifelong “admiration” for Maimonides (p. 126), but remains skeptical as to why a Kabbalist would find the Guide pertinent. Abulafia’s assertions to the effect that his theory of prophecy is substantially identical with Maimonides’ are dismissed by Scholem as “rationalizations” (p. 139). In general, in *Major Trends*, the role of Maimonides’ philosophy in Abulafia’s Kabbalah is minimized.

# YEHUDA LIEBES

## Zohar and Iamblichus

### Abstract:

The Zohar, the Cabbalistic 'Bible', has a special theory concerning magic. Magic, which for the Zohar is the essence of idolatry, is depicted there as identical in its form with Cabbalistic mystical theurgy, but directed not towards God but towards evil demons. This theory has been labeled in research Hermetic and Neo-Platonic, but only in general terms. This article makes a further step and finds a parallelism between a paragraph in the Zohar and a paragraph in *On the Mysteries of Iamblichus*, the Neo-Platonic philosopher. The two paragraphs expound the above theory in similar terms, and also cite as their source a similar authority, namely eastern sages or Chaldaean prophets. This parallelism may establish a literary connection between the Zohar and Iamblichus, who may be related also in other respects.

Moshe Idel has reshaped our understanding and image of Cabbala in many ways. One of the major themes of his research is the *Hermetic* and Neo-Platonic mystical-magical complex of praxis and ideas, dealing with drawing down spiritual forces from supernal entities. Idel dedicated to it much research, demonstrating the major role this theme played in Jewish mysticism and its development from Cabbala to Hasidism.<sup>1</sup> In the following article, dedicated to Idel and to our friendship, I'd like to make some contribution to this research, by establishing a possible literary connection between a paragraph dealing with this theme in the *Zohar*, the Cabbalistic 'Bible' (written in thirteenth century Spain), and a passage from Iamblichus, the Syrian philosopher of the third and fourth century of the Christian era, the foremost representative of *Hermeticism* and theurgy within the Neo-Platonic philosophical school.

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1 Moshe Idel, *Hasidism – Between Ecstasy and Magic*, SUNY, Albany 1994. See also Moshe Idel, 'The Magical and Neoplatonic interpretations of the Kabbalah in the Renaissance', *Jewish Thought in the sixteenth Century* (ed. Bernard D. Coopermann), Harvard University Press 1983, pp. 186-242; Moshe Idel, 'Hermeticism and Judaism', *Hermeticism and Renaissance* (eds. Merkel & Debus), Associated University Presses, 1988, pp. 59-76; and many other publications.

In propounding its lore about idolatry and magic, the *Zohar* does not pretend to be original. It refers explicitly to its sources, saying:

Come and see: If a person is drawn toward the blessed Holy One – his desire pursuing Him in this world – then afterward, when he departs, he is drawn towards Him and extended a way to ascend, following the attraction drawn daily, aspiringly in this world.<sup>2</sup>

Rabbi Abba said: One day I happened upon a certain town formerly inhabited by children of the East, and they told me some of the wisdom they knew from ancient days. They had found their books of wisdom, and they brought me one, in which was written: “As one’s aspiration is directed in this world, so he draws upon himself a spirit from above, corresponding to the aspiration to which he cleaves.<sup>3</sup> If his aspiration focuses on a supernal holy<sup>4</sup> entity, he draws that entity from above to himself below. If he aspires to cleave to the other side,<sup>5</sup> focusing there, then he draws that from above to himself below.”<sup>6</sup>

The same theory is found also in Iamblichus’ *On the Mysteries*, and there it is also attributed to similar sources:

I shall tell you, indeed, the account I once heard about these matters from the mouths of Chaldaean prophets.

Whoever are gods in the true sense, they alone are the givers of good things, and associate only with good men, and mingle with those purified by the sacred science, and they remove from them every vice and passion. [...] But as many as are themselves guilty of crime [...] as they are excluded from association with undefiled spirits because of these pollutions, they thus attached themselves to evil spirits, and being filled by them with the most evil inspirations, they become evil and unholy, gorged with licentious pleasures, full of vice, eager for habits foreign to the gods, and to sum up, they became akin to the wicked demons to whom they have become attached.

These, then, being full of passion and evil, draw evil spirits to themselves because of kinship, and are excited by them toward every vice, and so growing together, just like some kind of circle joining beginning to end,<sup>7</sup> they render in

2 Cf. Zohar 3:288a, where R. Simeon bar Yohai, the Zoharic hero himself, testifies to this in the day of his departure.

3 See TB Shabbat 104a: “If ones come to defile himself, he is provided an opening; if one comes to purify himself, he is assisted.” Cf. TB Makkot 10b: “One is led on the path one wishes to take.” See Zohar 1:54a, 56b, 62a, 125b, 169b, 198b; 2:50a; 3:47b. (The note is taken from the translator’s [Matt’s] note.)

4 Matt omits “holy”.

5 Sitra ahara. See below.

6 Zohar 1:99b. This English translation from the Zoharic Aramaic is taken from the Zohar, Pritzker Edition, Translation and Commentary by Daniel C. Matt, Stanford University Press 2004, vol. 2 pp. 121-122.

7 It is similar to the Ouroboros, the snakes who devours its tail. This symbol is used elsewhere in this book: Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, Translated with an introduction and notes by Emma C. Clarke, John M. Dillon and Jackson P. Hershbell, Atlanta 2003, p. 309, note 407. This symbol appears also in the Zohar, 2:176b. For its significance there see my book *Ars Poetica in Sefer Yetsira* [in Hebrew], Schocken Publishing House, Tel-Aviv 2000, pp. 135-13; and in my article ‘Earth Shaker: Rashbi’s Aloneness’ (in Hebrew). Judaism: Topics,

like manner an equal exchange. So, then, of the impious blunder of wickedness, some are introduced in a disorderly manner into the sacred works, while others make a disorderly approach also to what presents itself to them, and sometimes, so it seems, make one god come to their feast instead of another, and on occasion cause evil daemons to enter instead the gods, whom they call "anti-gods". You should never propose those things in a discourse about sacred divination.<sup>8</sup>

The Similarity between the two passages is striking indeed. As the *Zohar* parallels the evil practice of the idolatrous magician with the sacrosanct cult of the observant Cabbalist, so does Iamblichus parallel the evil practice of the magician with the recommendable act of a theurgist. Moreover, both sources describe both rites, the good and the evil, in terms of mystical communion, in which the practitioner who is engaged in either rite draws spirits, either holy or unholy, from a god or a demonic evil counterpart, which the *Zohar* calls *sitra ahara*, which means 'the other side' (i. e. other than holy and divine), and Iamblichus calls it in a somewhat similar manner "anti-gods".<sup>9</sup>

But the most striking evidence for establishing literary connection between these two passages is the fact that both rely as authority for this common parallelism pretty much on the same source, namely, sages of the east.

Who these eastern sages are, we do not know. Iamblichus calls them 'Chaldaean (i.e. Babylonian) prophets', so one may assume that his origin was the famous *Chaldean Oracles*, from which he actually draws much,<sup>10</sup> including the very term *theurgos* (= theurgist), which was probably first coined in the oracles.<sup>11</sup> The magic theory expounded above, suits in fact well the spirit of the *Oracles* (as well as the spirit of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, the other major source for Iamblichus' theurgy), but the exact source of the passage from Iamblichus and the *Zoharic* passage can not be found in the fragments preserved (as citations in later writers) from the *Oracles*, the text of which did not come down to us.<sup>12</sup>

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Fragments, Faces Identities: Jubilee Volume in Honor of Rivka Hurwitz (eds. Haviva Pedaya and Ephraim Meir), The Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2007, pp. 346-354. This article, as all my articles mentioned below, may be read also in my website: <http://pluto.huji.ac.il/~liebes/zohar>

- 8 On the Mysteries (mentioned above), pp. 196-199. This good English translation stands there in the counter pages of the Greek original.
- 9 The editors note here correctly, that antitheos (=anti-god) was originally a Homeric epithet meaning "equal to a god" and only in a later stage took on its evil meaning. The case of *sitra ahara* is quite similar. This seems to be a Zoharic coinage, but even in the Zohar it may mean just a neutral 'other side', though in most places it takes on the evil meaning, as a technical term for the world of Satan and its demons. The Greek term antitheos might conceivably play a role in the crystallization of its Zoharic counterpart *sitra ahara*.
- 10 See the editors' introduction to the above-mentioned *On the Mysteries*.
- 11 See *The Chaldean Oracles: Text, translation and commentary* by Ruth Majercik. Brill 1989, introduction, p. 21, note 56.
- 12 All the fragments are collected in the above-mentioned *The Chaldean Oracles*.

The last sentence in the passage of Iamblichus also has a parallel in the Zohar, in the continuation of the paragraph cited above.<sup>13</sup> The *Zohar* goes on there first to expound the above theme in detail, dealing with astrological magic (drawing down of astral powers) and pointing out its resemblance to Cabbala (both magicians and Cabbalists need actions, words and aspirations of the heart), then the *Zohar* goes on to compare the destiny of Cabbalists and magicians (the former become angels after departure, the latter demons).

But in concluding this theme the *Zohar* takes exception at his own very exposition. Now R. Abba exhorts his listeners to shun these books of eastern wisdom, albeit their lore is “close to words of Torah”, for the children of the east inherited their wisdom from Abraham, as it is written about them: “To the sons of his concubines Abraham gave gifts, while he was still alive, and he sent them away from his son Isaac eastward, to the land of the east.”<sup>14</sup>

Notwithstanding its Abrahamic source, this wisdom, which was somewhat distorted in subsequent generations, is not recommendable. After Abraham sent the sons of his concubines with their gifts away from his son Isaac, his offspring should not have anything to do with this wisdom but should cleave only to pure Torah, without any mixture. I find this exhortation to resemble a lot the words of Iamblichus in the last sentence of his passage cited above. Iamblichus also concludes his exposition in words of rebuke, taking exception at itself: “You should never propose those things in a discourse about sacred divination”.

The ‘Neo-platonic’ nature of the *Zoharic* lore about magic has been recognized in research, but only in general terms,<sup>15</sup> without adducing textual parallels, and without taking seriously the explicit words of the *Zohar* citing as its source books of eastern wisdom.<sup>16</sup> One may notice here conforming to the view of Gershom Scholem, the father of Cabbala research, who generally doubts the existence of the books the *Zohar* mentions as its sources.<sup>17</sup> But once we know of the Iamblichus’ parallel, we now must assume one of two possibilities, each of which entailing considerable consequences for the question of the sources of the *Zohar*: Either the *Zohar* and Iamblichus drew from the same source (conceivably the *Chaldean Oracles*), or that *On the Mysteries* of Iamblichus is the source of the *Zohar*.

13 Zohar 1:99b-100b.

14 Genesis 25:6. For this interpretation of the verse cf. TB Sanhedrin 91a.

15 See Dorit Cohen-Alloro, *Magic and Sorcery in the Zohar* (in Hebrew), Doctoral Dissertation (under the supervision of Prof. Rivka Schatz Uffenheimer), Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 1989, pp. 100-104, 229 (our *Zoharic* passage is cited there on page 101).

16 Cohen-Alloro (ibidem), p. 101, says that the *Zohar* ‘represents’ (matsig) this secret as included in eastern books of wisdom, and in page 369 note 10 she talks about the literary ‘motive’ of finding wisdom in ancient books.

17 See Gershom G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, Schocken, New York 1961, p. 174: “The whole book [namely: the *Zohar*] is full of fictitious quotations and other bogus references to imaginary writings...”.

It is true that the present state of our knowledge does not provide us with any clue to how the *On the Mysteries* or its source could have possibly reached the *Zohar* circle, so remote in terms of time, space and language. But even so, we should not let our ignorance destroy what we do know from striking textual data.

Iamblichus and the *Zohar* do in fact have much in common. As the *Zohar* combines the Neo-Platonic way of thinking with an eastern religion, namely Judaism, so does Iamblichus, the noble Syrian,<sup>18</sup> who in his *On the Mysteries* accounts in Neo-Platonic terms for the Egyptian and Mesopotamian religious rites (Iamblichus did so against the opposition of other members in the Neo-Platonic school, notably his own teacher Porphyry, as a response to whose attack *On the Mysteries* was written).<sup>19</sup>

Moreover, like the *Zohar*, *On the Mysteries* is also clothed in a pseudo-epigraphic guise: The *Zohar* is attributed to R. Simon bar Yohai and his disciples while *On the Mysteries* is attributed to an Egyptian priest named Abamon.

The name Abamon does not occur elsewhere, and many suggestions have been proposed for its interpretation (most of them find in it the name of the Egyptian god Amon).<sup>20</sup> To these I'd like to add the (remote) possibility, that the name Abamon alludes also to Abraham, whose name is derived, according to the Bible, from the Hebrew words *av hamon*,<sup>21</sup> which mean 'father of many nations', and can be interpreted also as 'founder of many religious rites' (even if this is the case, the element *amon* may still allude also to the Egyptian god).

The figure of Abraham might suit well the goal of Abamon-Iamblichus, for Abraham was considered in Jewish Hellenistic circles as the founder of astrology.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, Josephus Flavius connects this aspect of Abraham's figure with the sojourn of Abraham at Egypt, where he held religious-philosophical discussions with the Egyptian priests, and established there the Chaldean astral doctrine.<sup>23</sup> The figure of Abraham and his spiritual role was well known and highly appraised also in pagan circles, from Hecataeus of Abdeira on<sup>24</sup> (one of the Roman Caesars even set up in his shrine a statue of Abraham<sup>25</sup> – completely ignoring the iconoclastic role of Abraham in Judaism). Iamblichus could

18 His name is Semitic, and means: 'He shall be king'.

19 See the editors' introduction to the above-mentioned *On the Mysteries*.

20 See *ibidem*, pp. xxxiii-xxxvii.

21 Genesis 17:5. The pronunciation in Iamblichus' time may still have been: *ab hamon*, which in Greek, that does not have an *h* in the middle of a word, becomes Abamon.

22 See my above-mentioned book *Ars Poetica in Sefer Yetsira*, p. 297 note 57.

23 Josephus Flavius, *Jewish Antiquities*, I 161-168.

24 See my above-mentioned book *Ars Poetica in Sefer Yetsira*, part 4; and my article 'A Greek Contribution to the Faith of Abraham' (in Hebrew), *Tarbiz* 71, 2002, pp. 249-254.

25 *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, 'Severus Alexander', xxix 2.

therefore have been very well familiar with Abraham, although, admittedly, Judaism is very little referred to in his writings.<sup>26</sup>

The possibility that the *Zohar* was aware of the supposed connection between Abamon-lamblichus and Abraham is more tenuous still. This notwithstanding, one may still be nevertheless intrigued by the fact that the theme discussed above, found in the book attributed to Abamon, is attributed in a *Zoharic* close parallel to the gifts Abraham bequeathed to his concubines' sons.

And there is still something more general to say about the communion of lamblichus and the *Zohar*. The figure of lamblichus and his company, traveling in the Golan, as depicted by his biographer Eunapius, is similar in many ways to the *Zoharic* descriptions of the hero of the *Zohar*, R. Simeon b. Yohai and his company. This I tried elsewhere to demonstrate in detail.<sup>27</sup>

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26 See Menahem Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism*, The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, Jerusalem 1980, vol. 2, pp. 484-485.

27 See my 'Eros and Anteros on Jordan River' (in Hebrew), in: *Life as a Midrash: Perspectives in Jewish Psychology* (eds. S. Arzy, M. Fachler, B. Kahana), Yediote aharonot / Sifrei Hemed, Tel-Aviv 2004, pp. 158-167.

**RONIT MEROZ**

## Between Sefer Yezirah and Wisdom Literature: Three Binitarian Approaches in Sefer Yezirah

### **Abstract:**

This paper presents three basic ideas which are interrelated with one another: 1) The assertion that a single subject unites all the discussions in *Sefer Yezirah*, from beginning to end: namely, the nature of Wisdom, upon which the world stands (or is suspended); 2) A stylistic-linguistic analysis leading to the division of *Sefer Yezirah* into three “accounts,” around which are crystallized the style and contents of the book as a whole. The Account of the “Sealing of the Ends” is the latest of these accounts, and was written by the editor of the book, who joined his account with the other two to form a single book; 3) The assertion that the worldview reflected in *Sefer Yezirah* acknowledges the existence of a secondary power alongside God, that assists Him in the Creation and ongoing existence of the universe (as against doctrines claiming the existence of an additional force in conflict with God). The term I use in this context is binitarianism. In the earliest of the three accounts, that of the Covenant, this power assumes the form of an angel, while in the other two it is more abstract. This paper lays the foundations for this claim but, due to the limitations of this paper, I do not enter into discussion of its far-reaching implications. I hope to continue this discussion elsewhere, on another occasion.

*Sefer Yezirah* is one of the most important, basic books in the area of Kabbalah, and in the Middle Ages was also one of the basic books of Jewish philosophy.<sup>1</sup> This short book has been the subject of endless learned commentaries, and within the context of scholarship there have been serious disputes regarding the manner in which it is to be understood. The debate surrounding the date of the book may be

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1 See, for example, the summary of this phenomenon in Dan, “*Sefer Yezirah*”; Jospé, “Philosophical Commentaries.”

seen as mirroring the intensity of this dispute: there are those who date it during the first century ce; others who see it as having been written between the fourth to sixth century; and yet others who place it around the ninth century ce.<sup>2</sup> In any event, these different explanations created an opportunity for different scholars to identify a wide variety of intellectual or ideological parallels to the book, leading to a rich and fruitful discussion.

I hope that there is nevertheless room left for me to say something new, for which reason I wish to suggest a different viewpoint from that which has been emphasized thus far.<sup>3</sup> This is neither the place nor the framework to go beyond the scope of a brief paper and to enter into a full-scale monograph; therefore, I cannot relate here to all the numerous and important contributions of my predecessors, nor to explain every word, sentence or idea in the book.<sup>4</sup>

## 1. The Lexicon as Evidence of the Connection Between Sefer Yezirah and Wisdom Literature

*Sefer Yezirah* is well-known for its unique language—rich, rhythmic, poetic and addressing the heart. Among the variety of linguistic characteristics of this book, I wish to draw attention to the presence therein of many words or expressions that are characteristic of Wisdom Literature.

It is impossible, within the framework of a limited paper, to discuss the nature of Wisdom literature and its numerous offshoots and branches. Briefly put we can say though: biblical Wisdom literature, whose roots are found in the literature of the ancient world and particularly in ancient Egypt, deals with what is at times perceived as one of the qualities of God, and at other times as a separate entity, known as Wisdom. Wisdom as a distinct entity was created before the world (Prov. 8:22) and includes a wide variety of different kinds of knowledge—ethics and everyday norms alongside what would today be called the laws of nature. This literature continued to assume different forms over the course of subsequent centuries, and the boundaries between it and other doctrines dealing with the forces and entities that mediate between the world and God in the tasks of creation, revelation, providence, redemption and so forth, become obscured. One may thus see variations of Wisdom in teachings different from one another—in

2 For a selection of partial discussions of the contents of *Sefer Yezirah* and its time, see the bibliography at the end of this paper. A particularly rich bibliography is to be found in Liebes, *Torat ha-Yezirah*.

3 This point of view as such is not new (see, for example, Alloni, “Zunz,” 43), but to the best of my knowledge there is no scholarly study that presents this as unifying all parts of the work.

4 For discussions that contain a detailed, word by word analysis of the text, and not only discussion of its general aspects, see especially: Gruenwald, “Notes”; Liebes, *Torat ha-Yezirah*; *Yezirah*, ed. Gruenwald; *Yezirah*, ed. Hayman.

Philo and in Christianity (as Logos), among the Gnostics (as Sofia or the Demiurge), and among others as angels (Metatron and other angels).<sup>5</sup>

In order to demonstrate the connection of *Sefer Yezirah* to Wisdom literature, I shall present a number of terms from Biblical and post-Biblical Wisdom Literature that reappear in *Sefer Yezirah*.

One should note, first and foremost, that the terms most characteristic of Wisdom literature — **הַחֵם/הַחִמָּה**, *hakham/hokhmah* (wise/wisdom), **הַבִּינָה/בִּינָה**, *haven/binah* (understand/understanding) - appear several times in *Sefer Yezirah*. One should make particular mention of its opening: "By means of thirty-two... paths (**נתיבות**) of Wisdom..."<sup>6</sup> (§1; 1.1).<sup>7</sup> Regarding the term **נתיבות**, *netivot* ("paths"), that appears in this opening sentence, see especially the phrase in Job 24:13: "There are those who rebel against the light, who are not acquainted with its ways, and do not stay in its paths." That is to say, in the Book of Job, which belongs to Wisdom Literature, God has "paths"; as against those who rebel against the light, those who follow in the paths of God are meant to know Them. Even more important for our subject, according to the Book of Proverbs the place where Wisdom stands is called **בית נתיבות**, "the house of its paths" (Prov 8:2).

The opening sentence of *Sefer Yezirah* describes the "paths" (or perhaps Wisdom itself) as **פלאות**, *pela'ot*. In the Book of Job one finds the root of this term in the sense of "wonders" or "wondrous." Note, for example, how God addresses Job (Job 37:14-16): "Hear this, O Job; stop and consider the wondrous works of God. Do you know... the wondrous works of him who is perfect in knowledge." Thus, in the Bible this root relates to "every thing or event that is distinctive and unusual."<sup>8</sup> But in post-Biblical literature this root assumes the meaning of that which is hidden, concealed, secret. The best known example appears in *b. Tractate Hagigah* (13a):

5 We will suffice with only a few bibliographical allusions: Murphy, *Etz Hayyim*; Hurtado, *One God*; Segal, *Two Powers*; Gruenwald, *Apocryptics*, Ch. 3.

6 According to source P in the Hayman edition. For details about the different sources see the next note. In this paper I made extensive use of Hayman's excellent translation, for which I express my gratitude, but also introduced various changes in accordance with the understandings expressed in this paper, without specifically indicating this in every case.

7 Explanation of the form of indicating section numbers in *Sefer Yezirah*: following the sign §, there appears the paragraph number in Hayman's edition of *Sefer Yezirah* (which follows the system used in Gruenwald's edition); following the semi-colon I have indicated the number of chapter and mishnah of that same passage in the popular editions of *Sefer Yezirah*, published by Levin-Epstein. If not otherwise marked, I used the short version from the Hayman edition, referred to there as Source K; i.e., MS. Parma 2784.14 (De Rossi 1390), written in 1286 in Italian script, and which is the earliest of all manuscripts of the shorter version. On occasion I used other manuscripts, all of them based on the testimony of Hayman's edition. In presenting § 1, I made use of Source P—MS. Cincinnatti 523 (short version), written in the 15th century in Spanish script. For §18, I used Source F, British Library Or. 1263 (Margoliouth 600, short version), possibly written in Byzantine script in 1433 or slightly thereafter. For §38, I used Source S—Leiden, Wam 24, Cod. Or. 4762, written in 1540, possibly in Hebron, in Byzantine script. For §§38, 46 and 52, I used a very early manuscript from the 10th century—namely A, which specifically includes the long text, MS. Vatican 299. For a comprehensive discussion of all these sources and additional ones, see the introduction to Hayman's edition of *Sefer Yezirah*.

8 See s.v. **פלא**, Mandelkern, *Concordance*, 948, and Ben-Yehudah, *Dictionary* 10.4942.

“There is another firmament above the heads of the creatures, as is written, ‘Over the heads of the living creatures there was the likeness of a firmament, shining like awesome crystal, spread out above their heads’ (Ezek 1:22). To this point you are permitted to speak, from here on you are not allowed to speak, as is written in the *Book of Ben-Sira*, ‘In that which is hidden from you, do not expound; and that which is concealed from you, do not search out. Contemplate that which you have been permitted, and have no traffic in hidden things.’” The latter quotation is indeed taken from *Ben-Sira* (3:21-22), which belongs to the post-Biblical Wisdom literature, the sense of the quotation being to place limits upon the searching out, examination, contemplation and speaking about certain sublime subjects. The fact that *Sefer Yezirah* specifically incorporates the term *peḥa’ot*, “concealed,” in its opening sentence, a sentence that serves as a kind of a heading for the rest of the text, suggests the opposite possibility. It is as if the author turns to his readers and says: “Here in this book you will learn about the paths of wisdom that are hidden from the human eye; here we will tell you about things of which one generally speaking is not allowed to speak at all.”

*Sefer Yezirah* is known for introducing the term *sefirot*, whose various meanings will be discussed below. However, this term always appears in this book as part of the expression *ספירות בלימה*, *sefirot belimah*. The term *belimah* originates in the Book of Job (26:7), in which God is described as He who “stretches out the north over the void, and hangs the earth upon (*toleh ‘al*) *belimah*.” While most commentators see this verse as indicating that the earth is stretched over nothingness,<sup>9</sup> I would assert that *Sefer Yezirah*, by the very coining of the idiom *sefirot belimah* and the rich discussion thereof, attributes to it a positive meaning. In this *Sefer Yezirah* may rely upon creating a parallel between the first verse and another one: “Thou didst set the earth on its foundations, so that it should never be shaken” (Ps 104:5). According to the former verse, the earth hangs upon *belimah*; according to the latter, the earth stands upon a positive entity which is its foundation. Since there is in fact a parallelism in the Hebrew language between the two idioms (*‘omed ‘al/taluy ‘al*; “stand upon”/“hang upon”) one might also add here certain Rabbinic speculations that continue Wisdom literature regarding the subject of Creation: “Upon what does the earth stand? Upon the pillars... [There are those] who say: It stands upon twelve pillars... There are those who say: upon seven pillars... Rabbi Eleazar ben Shamua says: Upon one foundation, and *Tzaddik* [the Righteous] is its name.”<sup>10</sup> It would therefore appear that the idiom which appears in *Sefer Yezirah*, *sefirot belimah*, is to be seen as a clarifying parallel; the *sefirot* are themselves the

9 Rashi explains this as follows (ad loc.): “*Al belimah*—upon nothingness: There is nothing in the foundation because they stand in the air supported by the arms of the Holy One blessed be He; and cf. Klein, Horowitz and Tzevati, *Sefer Iyov*, 145, who interpret *belimah* as “nothing... naught.”

10 *b. Hagiga* 12b; and we shall not bring here further lists of “things” upon which the earth stands.

*belimah*. Or, to formulate matters differently, *belimah*, as the real foundation and ground of the world, is referred to by *Sefer Yezirah* by the title *sefirot*.

Two other terms in *Sefer Yezirah* may be viewed as synonyms to the term *sefirot belimah*: קצוות, *qezavot* ("extremities", "ends," or "edges"), and עומקים, *’omaqim* ("depths" or "dimensions").<sup>11</sup> Several verses in Wisdom literature evidently served as the basis for this usage: e.g., "the Creator of the ends of the earth" (Isa 40:28); "For He looks to the ends of the earth, and sees everything under the heavens" (Job 28:24); "He uncovered the deeps out of darkness, and brings deep darkness to light" (Job 12:22); "As the Heavens for height and the earth for depth" (Prov 25:3);<sup>12</sup> "All this I have tested by wisdom; I said, 'I will be wise'; but it was far from me. That which is, is far off, and deep, very deep; who can find it out?" (Eccl 7:23-24).

*Sefer Yezirah* defines a number of activities that God performs in the world. Among other things, He hews and weighs. To this we may add the idea of measure, also mentioned in relationship to the *sefirot belimah*. Thus, for example: "their measure is ten" (§7; 1.5). One of the basic verses of Wisdom literature is formulated thus: "Wisdom has built her house, she has hewn her seven pillars" (Prov 9:1). The subject of fixing weights and measures is a striking feature of Wisdom literature. Thus, in the Book of Job (28:20-25): "Whence then comes wisdom? And where is the place of understanding?... God understands the way to it... when he gave to the wind its weight, and meted out the waters by measure."<sup>13</sup>

In *Sefer Yezirah*, man is also asked to perform certain activities. It is incumbent upon him, for example, to be wise, to understand, to test and to investigate (§4; 1.4). There is no need to elaborate as to the wide dissemination of the first two verbs in Wisdom Literature. However, we must again emphasize that one is dealing here with the opposite of the usual reservations about this matter, such as found in *Masekhet Hagiga* or the Book of Ben-Sira. The root חקַר, *hq"r* ("to search out / to investigate / to study") generally appears in the Bible to exemplify the imbalance between man's abilities and those of God. It is stated regarding God that, from the human purview, "His understanding is unsearchable" (Isa 40:28; cf. Jer 31:36). By contrast, God's hands plumb "the depths of the earth" (*mehqerei aretz*, Ps 95:4; cf. Job 5:9). Man is totally unable to investigate God. "Can you find out the deep things of God? Can you find out the limit of the Almighty?" (Job 11:7), whereas He "does great things beyond understanding (אין חקר), and marvelous things without number" (Job 5:9; 9:10). There was nevertheless one figure who succeeded, more than the rest of mankind, in searching out these matters: "Besides being wise, Kohelet... weighed and studied (חקַר) and arranged proverbs with great care"

11 See §7; 1.5 and §38; 4.3, and adjacent to n. 28.

12 Compare to the phrase עומק רום ("the dimension/end of above") in *Sefer Yezirah* (§7; 1.5).

13 Cf. Jer 31:36; Isa 40:12.

(Eccles 12:9). It would appear that *Sefer Yezirah* expects its students to follow in this path, specifically.<sup>14</sup>

## 2. On Books and on Accounts

In the opening sentence of *Sefer Yezirah*, a simple and universally known term, *sefarim* (“books”) is used. However, the context turns it into something enigmatic and strange:

[§1; 1.1] By means of thirty-two concealed paths of wisdom Yah, the Lord of Hosts, carved out His Name [or: By means of thirty-two ... paths ... Yah, the Lord of Hosts is His Name, carved out]; by means of three *separim* : by means of *spr, spr wspr* [following Source P].<sup>15</sup>

There are several problems in this sentence. What is the actual meaning of the terms “books” (*sefarim, sefer*) and what is their syntactic status? What is the object of the verb “carved out”? In order to ease the reader’s puzzlement, early manuscripts already added an additional verb and object to the sentence. Thus, for example, according to Source K, which also represents the short version, we read:

[§1; 1.1] By means of thirty-two concealed paths of wisdom Yah, the Lord of hosts... The Living God... carved out His Name [or: By means of thirty-two ... paths ... Yah, the Lord of hosts... The Living God... is His Name, carved out]; He created his universe by means of three *sefarim*: by means of *spr spr wspr*.

There are several opinions concerning the meaning of the term *sefarim*. There are those who assert that it refers to writing (that is, a book), to number, or to a story or spoken account (i.e., *sefer, mispar, sippur*). Others claim that it refers to one of the other three-fold divisions appearing in the book, upon which we will elaborate further below, such as the division of the letters into three groups, or the division of the universe into three categories: “world,” “year” (i.e., – time) and “soul” (i.e., person); or perhaps to a hook, sphere, and heart.<sup>16</sup>

At this point I wish to draw attention to a fact that this root—i.e., ספר, *sp”r*—also belongs to the lexicon of words frequently used in Wisdom Literature, a point that further strengthens the claim that *Sefer Yezirah* belongs to this literature. In the Book of Job, for example, we are told that God is omniscient with regard to wisdom, and in particular that “then he saw it and declared it (ויספירה; *vayesaprah*); he established it and searched it out” (Job 28:27). Perusal of the comments of some of the exegetes and scholars on this verse reveals that the word *vayesaprah*

14 For further examples of use of terms taken from Wisdom Literature, see, e.g., notes 68, 77 below, and also the section, “On Books and Accounts.”

15 I have transcribed here the consonants of these Hebrew words alone, as there is some question as to their correct vocalization.

16 See, e.g., Hayman’s edition, ad. loc.

is understood in one of the following ways: “He counted its letters” (Rashi, who here relates explicitly to *Sefer Yezirah*), or to number in general (Ibn Ezra); telling or writing in a book (Ibn Ezra); the establishing of laws, or their being so-to-speak recorded in a book (Ralbag); relating or enumerating its characteristics (Hartum).

The root also appears in the verse, “Who can number (*mi yesaper*) the heavens by wisdom?” (Job 38:37), on which verse Ibn Ezra comments, “*mi yesaper*: in the sense of: who made them like sapphire [*even sapir*, a precious stone], like a solid speculum, and there are those who say it is from the word ‘book,’ and others say from ‘number,’ and others say, who can relate the wisdom of the heavens.”

The meanings of the verb discussed here confirm the understanding mentioned earlier: namely, that the intention is to writing (i.e., of a book), to number,<sup>17</sup> and to telling or relating in the sense of speech; to which we may now add—in the sense of enumerating qualities.<sup>18</sup>

As we shall see presently, the present paper claims that, among other things, *Sefer Yezirah* presents the reader with three descriptions of Wisdom, all three of which belong to Wisdom Literature. In wake of the use made of the root ספר, *sp”r*, in Wisdom Literature as well as in *Sefer Yezirah*, I saw fit to allude to these connotations. Thus in my following comments. I shall refer to the three descriptions presented in *Sefer Yezirah* as “accounts” (*sippurim*).

### 3. The Subject of Sefer Yezirah

The fact that *Sefer Yezirah* uses a not-insignificant lexicon of terms characteristic of Wisdom Literature indicates to us that the book belongs to this literature, as is indeed confirmed by examination of the opening sentence of the book. This sentence states, quite simply and clearly, *the one subject to be discussed throughout the rest of the book*: namely, how God formed his world by means of an entity divided into several “paths,” known as “Wisdom.” The book does not discuss the question as to how and when Wisdom itself was created, but starts with the assumption that it exists.<sup>19</sup> And, let us again emphasize—the opening sentence is

17 Discussion of this aspect of the book drew much attention among scholars. For more on this matter, see below, near footnotes 82, 94.

18 For further discussion of these “books,” see Liebes, *Torat ha-Yezirah*, Ch. 3 and end of Ch. 4, including his notes; Wasserstrom, “Further Thoughts”, 216–218.

19 The connection between *Sefer Yezirah* and the concept of wisdom has already been mentioned frequently in the past (see, e.g., Scholem, “Jewish Gnosis”). However, it has not been presented as the sole subject bridging the different parts of the book. In this context, it is extremely interesting to note the parallel drawn by Liebes between the opening sentence of *Sefer Yezirah* and the opening words of the Torah, “In the beginning, God created...” and particularly to the Targum Yerushalmi of these words: “With wisdom, God created...” In light of this, he sees the opening of *Sefer Yezirah* as a paraphrase of Genesis 1:1. See Liebes, *Torat ha-Yezirah*, 33, 165.

not simply the first sentence, but the key sentence, the heading of the book, the definition of its exclusive subject.

The concept of Wisdom as it appears within the framework of Wisdom literature unites various areas which in later times were considered separate and unconnected with one another: the manner of conduct of this world and ethics (see, e.g., the Book of Proverbs); the creation of the world, the ordering of the world<sup>20</sup> and the laws of nature, that is, what became known in later times as “science” (see, e.g., the Book of Job); and the Holy Spirit (see, e.g., the book of *Wisdom of Solomon*).<sup>21</sup> The concept of Wisdom thus explains in a natural way the appearance within *Sefer Yezirah* of all these areas, or of different, seemingly contradictory points-of-view. It also explains why there were so many disagreements among scholars of the book: the opposing characteristics they observed do indeed exist in *Sefer Yezirah*, so that there is nothing left but for us to unify them under one heading: the House of Wisdom.

From the opening sentence we learn that Wisdom has an internal structure by which it is divided into thirty-two paths. This complex is *described as pela’ot*, concealed; this being so, we learn that *Sefer Yezirah* as a whole is based upon the promise to include the readers in a special secret that not every person is privileged to know—the secret wisdom by whose means God hewed out the world (the covert assumption being that Wisdom is not only the source of the world, but that it is that which allows its continued existence since then). In the very next sentence, one of the secrets is revealed: namely, that the thirty-two paths are divided into two categories: ten *sefirot* and twenty-two letters (§2; 1.2).

It is my view that *Sefer Yezirah* presents several different answers to the question of the meaning of these claims: alternative solutions whose conceptual worlds are close to one another, yet nevertheless differ in several significant aspects. The opening of the book may therefore be read as presenting a shared, common claim or, alternatively, as posing the question presented for discussion. By the nature of things, such a presentation is done by one who knows and is familiar with the possible solutions—namely, the editor of the text.

The nature of the problem presented at the beginning of the book may be formulated in a number of different ways, or through means of several different conceptual systems. Thus: upon what does the world stand? The “discussants” agree that the world stands upon Wisdom and that it has such-and-such components, but what is the exact significance of this statement?

20 On the longing for order, justice, truth and law as a striking characteristic of the Wisdom Literature, see, e.g., Murphy, *The Tree of Life*, 115-118.

21 Together with this, one must emphasize the lack in *Sefer Yezirah* of one of the best known characteristics of Wisdom Literature: the femininity of wisdom. By contrast, in the Covenant Account, as we shall see below, we find Wisdom as explicitly masculine.

What is the nature of these components (apart from the number thirty-two upon which they agree)? Moreover, it would appear that all of the “discussants” agree that the relationship between Wisdom and the world is not a one-time connection related to a primordial event, but that Wisdom also continues to sustain the world and to act within it. It follows that the problem may also be formulated in the following manner: What are the bases of the world? Or, what are the foundations of the world? Is Wisdom the foundation of the world from an ontological viewpoint, or is there perhaps an abstract system of laws that determines the nature of its activity? Or does one perhaps need to clarify the meaning of the connection between Wisdom and the world within the framework of theological concepts?

From this point on, one says one thing and the other another: each one presents his own “book” or “account” as an answer to the question of the nature of Wisdom. I have made use of rather simple literary analyses and analyses of content in order to define the various answers of the “discussants,” as well as to determine the position of the editor who connected them all. This paper’s point of departure is thus that all the formulae that are before us today, and whose chain of transmission is examined so carefully in the editions of Ithamar Gruenwald and Peter Hayman, are posterior to the writing of the original answers. This claim applies equally well to the shorter version, which is considered one of the relatively early texts. Within the framework of this paper I shall therefore appeal only sporadically to this chain of transmission.<sup>22</sup>

The order of presentation is based upon convenience of discussion, and not on the order found in one or another edition or textual version. Hence, this

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22 Ithamar Gruenwald has suggested that *Sefer Yezirah* be seen as the result of the editing and combination of two different texts: one that deals with the *sefirot* (Chapter 1 in the Levin-Epstein edition), and the other (the rest of the book) concerned with the letters. In his opinion, the opening phrase of the book is a product of the later process of editing and unification (Gruenwald, “Notes”). When I first began my efforts to analyze this book, I accepted this position and used it as a starting point in my quest for a division of the text into secondary units that would lead to a relative unity of contents and style. However, in the end this path led to a dead end. For that reason, I turned to the assumption that underlies this paper: namely that the division into *sefirot* and letters is shared by all of the secondary sections. Gruenwald’s assumption that the opening passage belongs to the editorial stage remains valid. These working assumptions led me to creating what seems to me a higher level of unity, in which the primary problems that remain concentrate on the description of the twelve simple letters, and this in only two of the “accounts.” Moreover, the approach of Peter Hayman (see especially *Sefer Yezirah*, ed. Hayman, “Introduction”), in seeking a significant text is based upon the search for the earliest text of *Sefer Yezirah* that can be reconstructed, through careful examination of all the extant textual witnesses. In my work here I have made significant use of his edition and, like him, have preferred the shorter version among the three central texts—albeit at times I also made use of the long version. My working method was based upon the following assumptions and criteria: first, that even the earliest extant text constitutes a reworking of earlier materials and that too must be analyzed in order to reconstruct the underlying process of its creation. Secondly, that the longer versions are not only testament to later glosses, but might have preserved earlier versions not preserved in the short version. Third, that criteria of contents and style constitute a means of deciding among the value of different versions.

order of presentation is not to be understood as implying the actual historical sequence.

## 4. The First Account—The Sealing of the Ends

### The Sefirot

All the scholars engaged in research divide their answers into two distinct parts: they begin with the *sefirot* and continue with the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. We shall do so as well. And indeed, this is one of the more complex answers to the basic question of the book. We shall begin with the manner of relating to the *sefirot*:<sup>23</sup>

[§10; 1.9] Ten *sefirot* [*belimah*<sup>24</sup>]. One— the Spirit (*ruah*) of the Living God. Twice blessed is the name of the Life of the Worlds. Voice, and air (*ruah*) and word— this is the Holy Spirit (*ruah*).

[§12; 1.10] Two— air/wind (*ruah*) from Spirit (*ruah*). [He] carved and hewed in it the twenty-two basic letters – three “mother” [letters], and seven doubles, and twelve simple [letters].<sup>25</sup> . . .

[§13; 1.11] Three – water from air/wind (*ruah*). [He] carved and hewed in it *tohu* and *bohu*, mud and mire. . .

[§14; 1.12] Four – fire from water. [He] carved them and hewed in it the throne of glory, and the *Ofanim* and the *Serafim*, and the holy living creatures, and the ministering angels. And from the three of them he founded his abode. . .

[§15; 1.13] Five – [He] sealed above. [He] chose three simple [letters] and fixed them in his great name. And [He] sealed with them the six edges (of the universe), and [He] turned upwards and sealed it.

Six – He sealed below, and He turned downwards and sealed it.

Seven – He sealed the east, and He turned downwards [rd. in front] and sealed it.

Eight – He sealed the west, and He turned behind and sealed it.

Nine – He sealed the south, and He turned to his right and sealed it.

Ten – He sealed the north, and He turned to his left and sealed it.

23 The words appearing in square brackets were chosen from among the alternate readings presented by Hayman in his edition.

24 Here and in the rest of the quotations in this article, any addition in brackets is either from one of the other manuscripts, or added by me for sake of clarification.

25 This division of the letters will be discussed further along in the paper.

[§16; 1.14] These are the ten *sefirot belimah*: the Spirit (*ruah*) of the Living God; and air/wind (*ruah*), water, fire; above, below, east, west, north and south.

This account attributes to Wisdom—and, for the present, we shall discuss only one component thereof, that called *sefirot belimah*—a wide variety of functions in the existence of the universe. Here wisdom plays a role, first and foremost, in the very creation of the ontological reality of the world. The source of the basic elements of nature—air/wind, water and fire—are found therein. True, according to this account, this “Mendelian Table” of wisdom includes not only these three elements, but would appear to include seven elements.<sup>26</sup> Thus, the element of fire (as the fourth *sefirah*) has two aspects: fire, evidently meaning the source of the earthly fire that is familiar to us; but also of that fire from which the angels of Heaven, and even the Throne of Glory, are made. The element of water (as the third *sefirah*) is the source of water in this world, but also undergoes a transformation such that it becomes the element of the earth’s soil (mud and mire). This secondary division into two distinct entities stands out in particular with respect to *ruah* (which, despite the shared name, may be either wind/air or spirit), in which case the two different functions are each attributed to a different *sefirah*. *Ruah* as the second *sefirah* is evidently the source of one of the natural elements, called “air” (wind), while *ruah* as the first *sefirah*, i.e., spirit, belongs to an entirely different realm—that of the Holy Spirit, which in this account is connected to prophecy and revelation (discussed again in that part of *Sefer Yezirah* that I have referred to as the “General Introduction to the Discussion of the Letters”).<sup>27</sup>

The twenty-two letters were hewn and shaped from the *sefirah* representing air (wind) as one of the elements of nature (i.e., the second *sefirah*). As we shall see below, according to the following chapters of *Sefer Yezirah*, the letters serve for the creation of innumerable numbers of additional entities. This account supports the claim that Wisdom is composed of ten basic elements, ten *sefirot*, each one of which creates many secondary elements: the twenty-two letters with all their “products,” the earth, the angels, the Throne of Glory, etc. etc. From this point on, it would appear that the incorporation of various elements, both primary and secondary, is responsible for the functioning of this world.

The next six *sefirot*, referred to also as “ends” or “edges” (Hebrew: קצוות, *gezawot*),<sup>28</sup> serve as the Cartesian axis of the world: they determine the boundaries of its expanse in a way independent of the matter found therein. These six axes are identical to what are referred to today as the “three dimensions

26 This is but one of numerous examples that *Sefer Yezirah* has an interest to create a system of typological numbers of components.

27 See the discussion below, near footnote 53 and before it.

28 Cf. above, near n.11.

of space," except that each dimension is considered in *Sefer Yezirah* as divided into two axes or vectors, pointing in opposite directions from the central point of the world.

God Himself is doubtless found at the central point, shared by Wisdom and the world, as in the final passages of this account God addresses each of the winds of Heaven in order to "seal in" the *sefirot*. From the fact that this central point is not considered one of the elements of Wisdom, we may infer that both God and Wisdom are considered as transcendent, or at least beyond the limitations of space.<sup>29</sup>

The textual version cited above notes that God seals the six dimensions by means of "three simple letters"—that is, by means of three letters that belong to the category of the "simple letters"—which serve, not only to seal the creation, but are also "fixed within His great Name." All the other sources (as mentioned in Hayman's edition) state that this refers to the letters יהו, *YHW* - an interpretation accepted by all of the commentators and researchers. These sources also tend, generally speaking, to note that six seals were created from these three letters, each seal being a different one of the six possible combinations of these three letters—*YHW*, *YWH*, and so on.

The idea that one needs to seal the edges of the earth clearly belongs to a magical world of concepts, a point that has already been noted in studies of *Sefer Yezirah*.<sup>30</sup> The world-view implied here asserts a struggle between the forces of order and disorder. This is a world of chaos that repeatedly attempts to spread and to burst forth, to destroy that which exists, to sweep away its boundaries; against it stands God, who polices the primeval world, fixes its boundaries (in both the simple meaning of this word and in its borrowed meaning), and says—"Enough!" According to this account, in order to do so God uses the power of His Name—a name made from three of the letters of the Ineffable Name. One must emphasize that this magical power is combined with the system presented in this account as a new element, attributed, not to Wisdom, but seen as God's direct tool of activity in the world, in addition to Wisdom. Between the lines, an explicitly dynamic element is also introduced: in our world, intense movement occurs from the center (that is, the point of meeting of the six edges) outwards, while God brakes and halts this movement, determines finite limits to the world, and does not allow it to spread

29 It should be noted that the Divine Throne of Glory is enumerated among the secondary elements of the *sefirot belimah* (§14; 1.12) and is not transcendent. There is basis for the view that this contradiction indicates that the sentence concerning the Throne of Glory is a later gloss, a point upon which I cannot elaborate here. Compare, on the one hand, n. 114, and on the other hand the Depths Account (below, near n.56), and the Covenant Account (below, near n. 98). For a further discussion of God as the center of the world, see Liebes, *Torat ha-Yezirah*, Ch 24.

30 See, e.g., Hayman, "Was God a Magician?"; Liebes, *Torat ha-Yezirah*, Chs. 22-23. Regarding the general question as to whether *Sefer Yezirah* may be seen as having magical aspects, opinion is divided. See, in addition to this: Scholem, "The Idea of the Golem," esp. 169-172; Idel, *Golem*, Ch. 2; Dan, *Sefer Yezirah*, 254; Schäfer, "The Magic of the Golem"; Liebes, *Torat ha-Yezirah*, Ch. 11.

out indefinitely. It is also quite possible that this idea of extension and halting originated in wake of reflections upon the term *belimah*, mentioned in the Book of Job, which may be also understood as meaning “stopping” or “halting.”<sup>31</sup>

The characteristics of the *sefirot belimah* upon which the world is suspended therefore belong, according to this first “account,” to a world of theological, physical and magical concepts:

The first element is the Holy Spirit, *ruah hakodesh*, or prophecy and revelation. While the text does not go into detail concerning the significance of this subject, these concepts are almost certainly related to the unique connection between the people of Israel and its God, including the revelation of the Torah.<sup>32</sup> This connection is the first in a hierarchy of elements organizing the activity of the world. One might therefore formulate the assertion that the first *sefirah* corresponds to the Holy Spirit as meaning that the world is based first and foremost upon God, Torah, and prophecy.

The second group of elements upon which the world is based, in order of importance, is connected with the constituents of the world. This refers to the elements—air/wind/spirit, water and fire—and the manner of their double revelation, both in the supernatural world (as, for example, angels) and in this world. These are the building blocks of both these worlds, and Wisdom, as the foundation of the world, provides the components of the cosmic ontology which is lower than its own level.

The third group of elements in importance would be classified, from a modern viewpoint, in the single category of the dimensions of space.

In addition to the above, God himself acts directly in the world by means of the (magical) power inherent within His Name.

In conclusion, we should direct our attention to an outstanding stylistic feature of this “account”: that, in practice, it presents its answer twice—once in detail, and a second time, when it summarizes its approach in brief (§16; 1.14). That is, the author of the account has a tendency towards order, towards an aesthetic of structure, towards the importance of clarity of understanding—in addition to having an ear sensitive to the rhythm and tone of his words. Is he also the general editor of the book?

Already at this point we find clear and strong evidence for this claim, which further on in our discussion will become ever clearer. At the beginning of the book God’s activity is depicted as an act of hewing, as in stone. We shall immediately see that, among the three accounts dealing with the *sefirot*, the Sealing Account is the only one to make use of this verb. While this verb appears numerous

31 See Liebes, *Torat ha-Yezirah*, Ch. 9.

32 On the question of the Jewishness of *Sefer Yezirah*, see e.g. Liebes, *Torat ha-Yezirah*, Ch. 28; Wasserstrom, “Reappraisal,” 21–29.

times in the discussions of the letters, this is always by the author of the Sealing Account. Moreover, the author of this account makes use of the term “the living God” as the Name of God (§10; 1.9). Apart from this, this name only appears in editorial passages—in the opening passage, in the above-mentioned passage that summarizes and concludes the subject of the *sefirot* (§16; 1.14), and in the concluding passage on the subject of the letters (§56; 5.4).<sup>33</sup> We shall return further to this claim regarding the explicit connection between the author of the Sealing Account and the editor.<sup>34</sup>

## The Letters

The beginning of *Sefer Yezirah* defined Wisdom as a combination of ten *sefirot* and twenty-two letters. Several times during the course of the book there is presented the division of the twenty-two letters into three “mothers” or “matrices,” seven double letters, and twelve simple letters (see, e.g., §2; 1.2). The three “mothers” are defined as the letters **א, מ, ש**, (*alef, mem, shin*); gallons of ink have been spilled over the question of the criteria for the choice of these specific letters.<sup>35</sup> The seven double letters are **ב, ג, ד, ה, ו, ז, ח**, that is, the letters *beit, gimmel, dalet, kaf, peh, resh, and tav*,<sup>36</sup> while the “twelve simple letters” refers to all the other letters. We shall now need to identify those passages from this account that deal with the letters, as well as to connect them with the beginning of the Sealing Account, that deals with the *sefirot*.

In attempting to create a correspondence between the discussion of the letters and that of the *sefirot*, such that they will indeed be shown to belong to the same account, we shall use several simple means: on the one hand, the attempt to identify common or shared ideas, choice of words, or style; and, on the other hand, elimination of certain possibilities due to clear internal contradictions.

We shall begin with the descriptions of the seven double letters. The book presents us with three alternative descriptions.

According to one of them, these seven letters allude to the seven dimensions of space, referred to here as *qezavot*, “ends” or “edges” (§38; 4.3). Six of them represent what are referred to today as the three dimensions of space; but the central point, the locale of the Holy Sanctuary, is also considered as an “end” or “edge” to be counted, a seventh one. However, as we have seen above, the

33 The following is the text of §56; 5.4: “These are the twenty-two letters [on which] Yah, Yahwah, God, the Lord of Hosts, the Living God, the God of Israel, God almighty, *high and lofty, dwelling for ever, and holy is his name* (Is.57:15), [founded] (the universe)”

34 See below in the section headed “Editing.”

35 See, e.g., the summary in Aloni, “Zunz”; Liebes, *Torat ha-Yezirah*, Ch. 3; Wasserstrom, “Reappraisal,” 2–7.

36 Again, opinions are divided as to the criterion for the choice of this specific group of letters. See, especially, Epstein, “Studies,” 185–190; Liebes, “Seven Double Letters”; idem., “Response”; Morag, “Seven Double Letters”; idem., “Response”; Pines, “Points of Similarity,” 111; Kahle, *Geniza*, 184.

Sealing Account states that there are no more than six edges; hence, it would seem that this passage does not belong to the “account of the sealing.”

The second description (§37; 4.1) does not reveal, at this stage of our journey, explicit signs of either similarity or contradiction.

But the final description that remains for us to examine (§§39-43; 4.3-4.12) displays clear points of similarity to the Sealing Account: both make use of the combination of verbs *hqq* and *hzv*, “to hew” and “to mine”;<sup>37</sup> the verb *צר*, *zrf* (“combine”) appears several times in this description of the letters, and one can in addition find an entire passage (§40; 4.12) that exemplifies the principle of combination in practice. True, the description of the *sefirot* in the Sealing Account does not use the verb *zrf*; nevertheless, it exemplifies in practice various different combinations (i.e., of the letters *YHW*; see §15; 1.13). The description of the *sefirot* in this account betrays an explicit tendency towards magic based upon magical names. Even the crowns of the letters, mentioned repeatedly in the present discussion of the letters, is connected with this world. More generally, the entire connection between certain stars and what occurs in this world, a connection so strongly emphasized in this description, belongs to the world of magic, albeit not necessarily on that form of magic based on magical names. It would therefore seem that this description of the letters belongs to the second part of the “account of the sealing.”

Having stated this, it will be easier for us to identify those descriptions of the three “mothers” and twelve simple letters that belong to the Account of the Sealing, because the description that we have already identified is relatively lengthy and well-developed, providing us with further points of reference, in the form of repeated stylistic formulae. Thus, if in the sections describing the seven double letters we have found the group of verbs, “He carved and hewed them, he combined them, and formed with them” (§39; 4.4), it is possible to discern that such a group also appears in some of the descriptions of the three “mothers” and the twelve simple letters (§31; 3.5, and also in §46; 5.2). This phenomenon helps us determine which of them belong to the Account of Sealing. One may immediately discern how the stylistic formulae that characterize the descriptions of the seven double-letters belonging to our account are repeated as well in the other two descriptions (i.e., of the three “mothers” and the twelve simple letters).

Upon further examination, it becomes clear that these stylistic models, as well as the combinations of verbs mentioned above, also appear in another general description of the twenty-two letters, which ought by right to be added to the Sealing Account.

We will present here the description of the letters that, in our opinion, belong to the Sealing Account; albeit, due to its length we shall need to skip over several

<sup>37</sup> One should emphasize that these verbs are not found in the other two accounts.

passages. The presentation of the passages that have been chosen on the basis of the above-mentioned criteria creates a text of impressive stylistic unity:

[General Introduction to Discussion of the Letters]

[§17; 2.3] Twenty-two letters. They are hewn out in the air, carved out by the voice, fixed in the mouth in five positions: *Aleph, Het; He, Ayin; Bet, Waw; Mem, Pe; Gimel, Zayin; Kaph, Qof; Dalet, Tet; Lamed, Num, Taw; Zayin, Samek; Shin, Resh, Sade*.<sup>38</sup>

[§18; 2.4] The twenty-two letters are their foundation. They are fixed<sup>39</sup> on a wheel with two hundred and thirty-one gates. The wheel rotates backwards and forwards. And this is the sign: There is no good better than pleasure (*oneg*); there is no evil worse than affliction (*nega*).<sup>40</sup>

[§19; 2.2] Twenty-two letters: He carved them out, He hewed them, He weighed them, He exchanged them, He combined them and formed with them the life of all creation (or: all creatures) and the life of all that would be formed.

[§19; 2.5] How did he weigh and exchange them? *Aleph* with them all, and them all with *Aleph*; *Bet* with them all, and them all with *Bet*. And they all rotate in turn.<sup>41</sup>... The result is that all creation (or: all creatures) and all speech go out by one name...<sup>42</sup>

[Three Mother-Letters]

[§24; 3.2] Three mothers: *Alef, Mem, Shin* – a great secret, hidden and ineffable, and sealed with six rings [*taba'ot*].<sup>43</sup> And from it go out fire, and water and air (*ruah*), and they are divided into male and female.

[§31; 3.5] Three mothers: *Alef, Mem, Shin*. He carved them, hewed them, combined them and formed with them the three mothers in the universe, and the three mothers in the year, and the three mothers in the soul (*nefesh*, person), male and female.

38 This passage relates to the way in which the letters are produced by the mouth.

39 For another use of this root, see above, in the section on the *sefirot* in the Sealing Account—§15; 1.13.

40 This passage describes the technical method of creating of combinations of letters: all the letters are written in two concentric circles (the “wheel”), the circumference of the upper one being somewhat smaller than that of the lower one, and the circles are rotated in opposite directions to one another. A similar method was used by Abraham Abulafia; see Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, 23–24. *Oneg* and *nega* are two examples of different combinations of the same letters.

41 For a parallel to this in terms of contents, see §40; 4.12.

42 The formulation of §18 is taken from Source F (short version). It should be noted that I have skipped the text (and the ensuing discussion) of §§20, 22; 2.6.

43 The rings mentioned here may refer to the manner of creating the combination; see n. 40. One should also mention the idiom, **טבנת חותם**, literally, “sealing ring.”

[§32; 3.6] He made *Aleph* a king over air (*ruah*), and bound to it a crown, and combined them [the letters] with each other, and sealed<sup>44</sup> with them air (*awir*) in the universe, humidity in the year, and the chest in the soul (*nefesh*)<sup>45</sup>...

[§33; 3.7] He made *Mem* a king over water, and bound to it a crown, and sealed with it earth in the universe, cold in the year, and belly<sup>46</sup> in the soul (soul)...

[§34; 3.8] He made *Shin* a king over fire, and bound to it a crown, and combined them [the letters] with one another, and sealed with it heaven in the universe, heat in the year, and the head in the soul (*nefesh*)....

[Seven Double Letters]

[§39; 4.4] Seven double [letters]: *Bet, Gimel, Dalet; Kaph, Pe, Resh, Taw*. He carved and hewed them, he combined them, and formed with them the planets in the universe, the days in the year, and the apertures in the soul (*nefesh*), by sevens.

[§40; 4.12] How did he combine them? Two stones build two houses; three build six... seven build five thousand and forty.<sup>47</sup> From here on go out and ponder what the mouth cannot speak, and what the ear cannot hear.

[§41; 4.5-11] (1) He made *Bet* a king, and bound to it a crown, and combined them [the letters] one with another, and formed with it Saturn in the universe, the Sabbath in the year, and the mouth in the soul [*nefesh*].

(2) He made *Gimel* a king, and bound to it a crown, and combined them [the letters] one with another, and formed with it Jupiter in the universe, the first day of the week in the year, and the right eye in mankind the soul [*nefesh*]....

(7) He made *Taw* a king, and bound to it a crown, and combined them [the letters] one with another, and formed with it the Moon in the universe, the sixth day of the week in the year, and the left ear in the soul [*nefesh*].<sup>48</sup>

[§42; 4.4] And with them were carved out seven firmaments, seven earths, seven hours and seven times. Therefore he loved the seventh under heaven [after Eccles 3:1]<sup>49</sup>...

[Twelve Simple Letters]

44 Compare §15; 1.13, in the section on *sefirot* in the Sealing Account.

45 From this sentence and many others, it follows that the term *nefesh*, "soul," relates to the entire human complex of body and soul.

46 In the source, "וּפְרִי בֶּטֶן" - i.e., the fruit of the womb; as Hayman himself notes, this formula is evidently erroneous.

47 The passage explains how many different permutations may be formed from each number of the letters. From two letters it is possible to create two different permutations; from three, six; and so on. I have omitted the explanation of four, five and six letters.

48 The section explains how the letters *bg'd kpr't* are responsible for the creation of three levels in the creation—the seven planets, the seven days of the week, and the seven apertures in the human head. I have skipped the text of several of the letters in the middle of this passage.

49 I have skipped the translation of §43.

[§49; 5.2] Twelve [simple] letters: *He, Waw, Zayin, Het, Tet, Yod, Lamed, Nun, Samek, Ayin, Sade, Qof*. He carved them and hewed them out, he weighed them and exchanged them, and formed with them the twelve constellations in the universe, the twelve months in the year, the twelve principal organs [*manhigim*; “leaders”] in the soul [*nefesh*].

[§49; 5.2] These are the twelve constellations in the universe: Aries, Taurus... And these are the twelve months: Nisan, Iyar... And these are the twelve principal organs in mankind: the right hand, the left hand....

[§52; 5.2] He made [the letter] *He* a king and bound it to a crown, and combined them [the letters] one with another, and formed with it Aries in the universe and Nisan in the year, and the liver in the soul [*nefesh*]...<sup>50</sup>

The Sealing Account is thus a lengthy, richly-developed account that in practice takes up most of *Sefer Yezirah*, for which reason it also had great influence upon the subsequent development of the Kabbalah.

This account speaks extensively about the power of the letters. If in the first part, which dealt with *sefirot*, the letters had (magical) power to rule over the world and to give it boundaries, in the section focused upon the letters they have additional power. In practice, the text sees the letters as literal building blocks, the world therefore being tantamount to a house. It is for good reason that he refers to them in §40 (4.1) as “stones” that build the “houses,” to which there were also added “gates” (§18; 2.4). The essence of this account lies in the enumeration of which letters—which, as mentioned, constitute Wisdom—participate in the formation of which part of the physical world, in the sense of a house—heaven and earth and all that is within them. By association, we arrive at the dictum that “Bezalel combines the letters with which heaven and earth were built.”<sup>51</sup> But, as is known, Bezalel knew this wisdom in the context of his task as builder of the Tabernacle. We therefore see that this associative connection leads us to the understanding that this account speaks of a world constructed upon the model of the Tabernacle (that is, the Tabernacle built by Bezalel was a kind of model and mirror of the structure of the cosmos as a whole). Or, from another viewpoint, the very structure of the world which this account relates indicates its holiness! In the same way, this house alludes to the house of Wisdom, evidently the world as a house built thereby. For, according to Wisdom literature, “wisdom has built her house, she has hewn her seven pillars” (Prov 9:1)—and she herself raises her voice and calls upon human beings (by means of *Sefer Yezirah*?) when “On the heights beside the way, in the

50 The final paragraph according to source A (long version; see above, n. 7). However, I see no reason to reject it for this reason, as it is consistent with the other parts of this account in its style and contents.

51 *b. Berakhot* 55b. One should take note that the proof brought immediately thereafter is based upon the creation of a parallel between the acts of Bezalel and God’s activity, in the spirit of the Wisdom Literature: “It says here, ‘and he has filled him with the Spirit of God, with ability, with intelligence, with knowledge, and with all craftsmanship’ (Exod 35:31), and it says there, ‘The Lord by wisdom founded the earth; by understanding he established the heavens’ (Prov 3:19).”

paths she takes her stand; beside the gates in front of the town, at the entrance of the portals she cries aloud" (Prov 8:2-3). In the dialogue that takes place among the three accounts in *Sefer Yezirah*, the Covenant Account claims, as we shall see below, that the "Holy Tabernacle" serves as the *axis mundi*. The Sealing Account responds to this by saying that the entire world, and not just its center, is the Holy Tabernacle.

The text also speaks extensively about the constellations, suggesting that we are also dealing here with an astrological world-view. The "products" of the letters are presented in the text under a further division—universe, year, and soul. The category of universe includes the aspects of the heavens and its division into firmaments, the planets and the constellations, the earth (or the seven lands), and the air between heaven and earth. The category of year relates to the hours of the day, the seven days of the week, and the seasons of the year, while the category of soul relates to the various different organs of the human body.

The text that I have designated by the title, "General Introduction to the Discussion of the Letters," also deals with the human aspect, elaborating upon the manner of pronunciation of the letters by man, and of the creation of the combinations per se. On the face of it, this text seems to deal only with the manner in which God "formed with them the life of all creatures ion (or: all creatures) and the life of all that would be formed." However, if it were relating to the deeds of God, why does it need to explain where in man's mouth the letters are shaped and even to elaborate how the "wheel" is made<sup>52</sup> to assist in the creation of these combinations? Clearly, the implication is that it is fitting that man himself ought to engage in these combinations, similar to God. What might be the likely goals of engaging in such combinations? One goal is evidently alluded to at the beginning of the section dealing with the *sefirot*, that is, the Holy Spirit (§10; 1.9) It is difficult to escape the impression that a second purpose is concrete involvement in magic, in all its possible varieties, from amulets to the creation of living beings, such as a three-year old calf or a golem.<sup>53</sup>

In conclusion, the Sealing Account presents a broad picture of a structure of the world based upon *sefirot* and letters, making use of a world of concepts taken from theology, physics, verbal magic and astrological magic. The tendency of the author of this unit to return repeatedly to certain stylistic formulae, and the idea of combinations of letters, help us to locate the various parts of this account, which are scattered among the different chapters of the book.

<sup>52</sup> On the "wheel," see note 40.

<sup>53</sup> See *b. Sanhedrin* 65b and the references mentioned in note 27.

## 5. The Second Account: The Depths

### The Sefirot

In the second “account,” a different answer is given to the basic question of our book—namely, what is meant by the *belimah* upon which the world is suspended—as follows:

[§7; 1.5] Ten *sefirot belimah*. Their measure is ten, for they have no limit: depth [*omeq*; [or: “dimension”] of beginning and depth of end, depth of good and depth of evil, depth of above and depth of below, depth of east and depth of west, depth of north and depth of south. And the unique Lord, a trustworthy divine king, rules over them all from his holy abode for ever and ever.

This account, more than the preceding one, emphasizes the inability of human beings to fully comprehend the idea of *belimah*. While, it is true, it shares with us certain extraordinary secrets, despite this—or perhaps because of this—we must remember that, in the final analysis, the *sefirot* are without end; that is, that man as such is unable to fully comprehend them.<sup>54</sup> For this reason the *sefirot* are designated by the name עומקים, *’omaqim* (“depths”), thereby alluding to the words of Kohelet, “that which is far off, and deep, very deep; who can find it out?” (Eccl 7:24). The author of the Depths Account thus pays attention, already at the beginning of his discussion, to the subjective nature of human knowledge, and particularly to its limitations.<sup>55</sup>

The aspects of the *sefirot belimah* as seen by the author of the Depths Account are different from those of the Sealing Account, more strongly emphasizing the physical and ethical aspects thereof:

The dimension of time, which from his viewpoint is considered as two *sefirot*—the depth of the beginning and the depth of the end.

The ethical dimension, which is also seen by him as double or binary—the depth of goodness and the depth of evil. He almost certainly considers the ethical dimension to be one that incorporates the entire Torah, with all of its commandments and with the imperative to hearken to God’s words per se. In this way, a theological element also penetrates into his account.

The realm of space, with its six directions.

54 The intention of the term *Ein Sof*, “infinite,” is not that the *sefirot* have no ontological boundary—the world of *Sefer Yezirah* is a finite and delimited world, as we have already seen in the first account. This term refers to man’s epistemological ability and not to the characteristics of the objective world per se.

55 The author of the Sealing Account testifies in §40: “From here on go out and ponder what the mouth cannot speak, and what the ear cannot hear.” But according to the context, this limitation relates to the huge number of possible permutations, a vastness which a person cannot comprehend. By contrast, according to the author of the Depths Account, the obstacle to knowledge is not quantitative, but rather its essence.

The author of the Depths Account claims that not only God, but also His habitation (*me'on qodsho*), transcend both Wisdom and the world.<sup>56</sup> Likewise, God continues to rule over His world, not only by means of wisdom, but also in a direct manner, although the account does not explain exactly how.

## The Letters

We may now continue to seek the second half of the Depths Account, the part which deals with letters.

We will begin with the three “mothers.” It is fairly easy, by means of elimination, to find those passages that belong to the Depths Account. §§24, 31-34 (3.2, 5-8) have already been attributed, on the basis of explicit signs, to the Sealing Account. We shall establish, with the same degree of certainty, that §§23, 25-26, and 28-30 (3.1, 3-4; 6.1) belong to the Covenant Account. This leaves us only with a few remaining passages, clearly demarcated, that deal with the three “mothers,” and are thus part of the Depth Account.<sup>57</sup>

These passages draw a connection between the three “mothers” and the concepts of universe, year and soul, which we have already encountered in the Sealing Account. The discussion turns from there to identifying the “king” who rules in each one of these three above-mentioned realms. The king in the realm of space is the *Teli*, that is, the “Heavenly Dragon”;<sup>58</sup> the king ruling over time is the “Wheel,” that is to say, the circle of the zodiac; while the king in the realm of the soul, i.e., within man, is the heart. Immediately following this passage the text again presents the binary approach to the world, concluding with the optimistic and definitive statement: “Good is stored up for the good and evil is kept for the evil” (§60; 6.2).

On the other hand, the connection drawn by this account between the “mothers” and the above-mentioned concepts is indirect, if not serpentine. Note the following passage:<sup>59</sup>

[§27; 3.2] Three mothers: *Alef, Mem, Shin*. And from them were born three fathers from whom everything was created.

This entire passage, as has been noted by several scholars, seems artificial and apologetic.<sup>60</sup> It is characteristic of someone who is interested in preserving an authoritative intellectual tradition, while simultaneously giving it a new meaning. My conjecture is thus that the author of the Depths Account had an extant tradition

56 For the author of the Sealing Account, God’s Habitation (that is, the Throne of Glory) is not transcendent to the world, but the result of one of the *sefirot*. Compare what is said above in n. 29.

57 This refers to the following passages: §27; 3.2; §§58-60; 6.1-2.

58 For greater elaboration on the concept of the *Teli*, see, for example, Sharf, *Donnolo*, Ch. 3; idem., *Byzantium*, 178-179; Vajda, “Commentaire,” 32-33.

59 See also in Hayman’s edition, §50; 5.3.

60 See the summary of these claims in Hayman’s edition.

regarding the three “mothers” related to the three elements of fire, water and air, by whose means the universe, the year, and the soul were created. He needs §27, which we cited above, in order to deviate from his own tradition and present his discussion as follows:

[§58; 6.1] Three fathers and their offspring... And a proof for the matter—trust-worthy witnesses: the universe, the year and soul.

Let us now turn to a discussion of the seven double letters. *Sefer Yezirah* contains three descriptions of these letters. We have already seen that the description relating to the planets (§§39-43; 4.3-12) belongs to the Sealing Account. Another description, referring to the seven “edges” (§38; 4.3), is not appropriate to our account for the same reason that it is not appropriate to the Sealing Account—namely, that it asserts the existence of seven dimensions in space, and not six.

We are therefore left with the third description (§37; 4.1). This passage presents a binary picture of reality, consistent with the binary approach to ethics which we have found in the section of this account dealing with the *sefirot*, one which in practice even expands it. There, we find “depth of good and depth of evil” (§7; 1.5), while here we find “opposites” and polarities—life and death, peace and evil, and so on. The claim made in §7 (1.5), that God is “the unique Lord,” now emerges as a deliberate presentation of opposites: the entire world is composed of opposites, and God alone is the unique Lord.<sup>61</sup>

It should be emphasized that there is no special connection presented here between any particular letter and pair of opposites—this, in contrast to the Sealing Account, in which each of the seven double-letters is connected to a particular entity, even if this connection is artificial. It also differs from the description of the three “mothers,” in which an attempt may be seen to create a connection between the indicator letter and the name of the element indicated (i.e., *alef* corresponding to *avir*, air; *mem* corresponding to *mayim*, water; and *shin* to *esh*, fire). The author of the Depths Account directs his attention to only two aspects of the “building blocks of the universe”: the number of letters (i.e., seven double ones), and a phonetic characteristic.<sup>62</sup> By contrast, in the Sealing Account, one sees a more

61 It is difficult to ignore the connection between the Depths Account and *Midrash Temurah* (Eisenstein, *Ozar*, 580-583). Thus for example, six of the opposites presented in the Depths Account are also represented there, Ch. 2 (in practice, the only pair lacking there is “rulership/slavery”). Near the end of Ch. 3 of that midrash, there is a paraphrase of the next passage from our account (§7; 1.5). Zunz (Zunz–Albeck, *Ha-Derashot*, 57); and Jellinek (*Beit Midrash*, Part I, xx) claimed that this midrash is from the 13th century. But does not the similarity between the two works suggest that *Midrash Temurah* as it is known to us had a more ancient source, closer in time to *Sefer Yezirah*? Indeed, Yehudah Liebes devoted a special chapter in his book to this parallel text (Liebes, *Torat ha-Yezirah*, Ch. 7). The difference between our respective claims lies in my focus on the parallelism between this midrash and the Depths Account, specifically, and not to all of *Sefer Yezirah*. In any event, other scholars have also speculated that this midrash has an earlier layer than the 13th century (Liebes, *ibid.*; Freudenthal, *Ha-Avir*, 212.) It may also be possible to connect between the Depths Account and the world of ideas mentioned in Pines, “Points of Similarity.”

62 Attention to the phonetic aspect also appears below, in the Covenant Account; see §26; 6.1: “*Mem* is silent and *Shin* hisses.”

explicit connection to writing, particularly to hewing and shaping. These “building blocks” are hewn and shaped, and only thereafter is an attempt to enunciate the combination.<sup>63</sup>

We shall conclude our discussion of this account with the twelve simple letters. Unlike the other sections of the book, here we find that the unraveling of the labyrinth of ideas encounters more difficulties. It seems to me that one may reasonably conjecture that the extant discussion of the twelve simple letters is the result, both of loss of material and of the mixing of two distinct accounts: the Depths Account and the Covenant Account (to be discussed below). This mixing may have derived from the fact that the one account initially borrowed one or another passage from the other.

§45 (5.1) draws a connection between the twelve letters and twelve activities of human beings (“soul,” in the language of *Sefer Yezirah*)—seeing, hearing, sleeping and the like. In terms of deciding with which account to identify this passage, one may bring two arguments. On the one hand, a certain stylistic pattern that appears in this passage—“twelve simple [letters]... their basis...”—appears both in the Covenant Account, to be discussed below,<sup>64</sup> and in the Depths Account (§37; 4.1), and may therefore belong to either one of the two. On the other hand, as we shall see, the Covenant Account tends to be more poetic, making the technical style of this passage unsuitable to it.

§46 includes a stylistic form that is characteristic of the Covenant Account rather than of the Depths Account—“twelve and not eleven.” It is absent in the short version, for which reason Peter Hayman tends to think that it is a later addition.<sup>65</sup> I nevertheless wonder whether this may not be an old remnant of this account that anticipates the following passage, which likewise belongs to the Covenant Account, whose very existence testifies to its source. An alternative thesis to that of Hayman might thus be that the author of the Depths Account was the one who deleted it (in other words, the Covenant Account preceded it), but that it survived in other hands.

§47 (5.1) draws a connection between the twelve letters and twelve “diagonal lines.” There are three considerations in support of the view that this passage belongs to Depths Account. First, that it appears in the short version immediately after §45 (this argument is valid only in the event that this last passage does in fact belong to the Depths Account), such that §§45-47 would seem to be one unit. Second, it contains a linguistic expression found in the Depths Account that does not appear in either of the other accounts—namely, **מידתן**, *midatan* (“their measure”; §7; 1.5). Finally, one passage that is included in the Depths Account and

63 See §17; 2.3.

64 See below §23; 3.1.

65 See below for the discussion in §38; 4.2, as part of the Covenant Account.

which discusses the three “mothers” mentions the twelve diagonal lines (§58; 6.1). Against this, there are three other considerations in favor of its belonging to the Covenant Account: one, that the language of this passage is poetic and archaic; second, that it includes a linguistic expression found, not only in the Depths Account, but also in the Covenant Account—namely, עדי עדי, *adei’ad* (“forever and ever”; in §7, as well as in §38; 4.3, to be discussed below); and third, the “testimony” of §46, as mentioned above, that may serve as its introduction and which bears linguistic characteristics of the Covenant Account.

It is therefore difficult to determine where §47 belongs. It is also possible that it belongs to both accounts, for which reason, regarding the twelve simple letters, we do not have three full and separate accounts.

Of all these passages, §48a is most similar in character to what we have found thus far regarding the Depths Account. It presents a binary approach, based upon the Book of Ecclesiastes, which is also mentioned in this account’s discussion of the three “mothers.”

[§48a; 5.2] He made them a sort of lawsuit, he arranged them in battle array, *one opposite the other God made them* (Eccles 7:14).

On the other hand, the exact context of these things is not entirely clear. According to the short version, this passage appears immediately after the discussion of the “twelve principal organs in the soul” (§49b; 5.2), which in terms of contents belongs to the Sealing Account.

This point may also relate to the following passages, which have a binary nature and which use a linguistic phrase already found in the section dealing with the *sefirot*—“the divine, trustworthy king rules over them all.” [§7; 1.5]

[§48b; 6.3] ... Twelve stand in battle array: three love but three hate; three give life but three kill. And the divine, trustworthy king rules over them all. ...

Simultaneously, elsewhere in §48b there appears a phrase characteristic of the Covenant Account: “one is the law which holds the balance between them.”

Finally, even if our understanding of the section dealing with the twelve simple letters has not been fully articulated, we can still clearly distinguish that the worldview of the author of the Depths Account is binary, a characteristic relating not only to moral behavior, but to all aspects of life. To live well and in peace, to have offspring, to be wealthy, wise, handsome and powerful—this is good—and is an explicit sign of a proper ethical life, for “good is stored up for the good.” Poverty, ugliness, slavery and other opposites of the previous list are taken as signs of the person’s negative ethical character, for “evil is stored up for the evil.” This approach, it is true, acknowledges the absolute place of God, and hence of the service of God (remember the sentence, “the unique Lord, a trustworthy divine king, rules over them all from his holy abode for ever and ever”), but together with that is very earthly and practical, without any hint of asceticism. The Holy

Spirit, the highest and most important element in the Sealing Account, is not mentioned here at all. The spiritual elevation and sectarian self-closure which we will find below in the Covenant Account do not appear here at all. The account reflects a fundamentally conservative, establishment-oriented, self-satisfied social attitude. While astrological magic is alluded to here by the very mention of the zodiac, letter magic, which is more likely to carry an underground or revolutionary character (as in the making of a golem, for example), is not mentioned here at all. Moreover, all of the discussions of letters by the author of the Depths Account are only concerned with external aspects (i.e., their number; classification by type), and not with other characteristics that might be found therein, which were found in them by the author of the Sealing Account .

Notwithstanding that the general subject of *Sefer Yezirah* is the nature of Wisdom, identified with the *belimah* upon which the entire world is suspended, the emphasis in the Depths Account (at least from the quantitative viewpoint) is specifically the conduct of this world. One might present its position as follows: let us briefly consider the nature of Wisdom—the world is based upon the dimensions of time, space and ethics—but there is no reason to elaborate upon this matter overly much. These are the “depths” which “have no end” and it “is deep, very deep, who can find it?” We can never succeed in fully understanding them. While it is perhaps desirable that we know one or two things about the subjects mentioned, from there on we ought to be concerned with our own matters (and one cannot escape the awareness that proper care about the *mitzvot* is among these). The essential message is thus that the binary, established, earthly ethics that characterizes this world has its basis in the foundations of the world itself. This ethics is absolute, not relative; there is absolutely no doubt in the matter—the rulers, the wealthy, etc., are ethically good; there is no other possibility. The Depths Account testifies to their righteousness and strengthens the existing social order! If the problem presented for discussion at the beginning of the book related to the characteristics and paths of wisdom, the author of the Depths Account comes along and says that the ways of Wisdom are sufficiently known in this world and man needs to walk therein. Indeed, as in the words of Job cited at the beginning of this paper (24:13), if we do not wish to be counted among those who rebel against the light, we must “consider” the ways of God and wisdom, follow the righteous path, the path of life, of goodness, listen to all the words of God—and we shall thereby see blessing in our labors. Everything we need to know about these paths is already known to us, and there is no need for us to delve into that which in any event is beyond our ken.

We shall now present those passages dealing with the letters within the framework of the Depths Account, noting that the selection of passages describing the twelve simple letters was filled with difficulties and puzzles. In any event, it is

interesting to note that, alongside the binary approach, we find that most of the ideas here appear in descriptions of either two or four words, generally speaking in a more rhythmic Hebrew than that of the Sealing Account:

[Three Mother-Letters]

[§27; 3.2] Three mothers: *Alef, Mem, Shin*. And from them were born three fathers from whom everything was created.

[§58; 6.1] Three fathers and their offspring, and seven dominant ones<sup>66</sup> and their hosts, and the twelve diagonal lines. And a proof for the matter – trustworthy witnesses: the universe, the year and the soul [*nefesh*].

[§59; 6.1-2] There is a law of ten, three, seven and twelve.... The *Teli* in the universe is like a king on his throne; the zodiac in the year is like a king in a province; the heart in the soul [*nefesh*] is like a king<sup>67</sup> at war.

[§60; 6.2] *So God has created every object,*<sup>68</sup> *one opposite the other* (cf. Qoh 7:14): good opposite evil – good from good and evil from evil. Good brings evil to light and evil brings good to light. Good is stored up for the good and evil is kept for the evil.

[Seven Double Letters]

[§37; 4.1] Seven double [letters]: *Bet, Gimel, Dalet; Kaph, Pe, Resh, Tav*. They are pronounced with the tongue in two different positions. Their basis is life and peace, wisdom, wealth, prosperity, beauty and mastery.... They are double [letters] because they are opposites. The opposite of life is death; the opposite of peace is evil; the opposite of wisdom is folly; the opposite of wealth is poverty; the opposite of prosperity is desolation; the opposite of beauty is ugliness; and the opposite of mastery is slavery.

[Twelve Simple Letters]

The following passages were mixed up, evidently as a result of the sharing of material between the Depths Account and the Covenant Account. Those passages which were almost certainly adopted by one from the other are marked with an asterisk.

\* [§45; 5.1] Twelve simple [letters]: *He, Waw, Zayin, Het, Tet, Yod, Lamed, Nun, Samek, Ayin, Sade, Qof*. Their basis is sight, hearing, smelling, talking, eating, sexual intercourse, action, walking, anger, laughter, thought, sleep.

66 Some of the versions have here the word *kokhvim* ("stars") instead of *koveshim* (dominant ones); however, it should be noted that the discussion of the three fathers occurs in connection with the concept of the king, a concept that belongs to the semantic field of rulership. This will make it easier for us to distinguish that words belonging to this semantic field also appear in the following description of the seven double letters, that is: "strong and weak...rulership and slavery." It would therefore seem that the term "seven (dominant ones)" refers to the seven double letters as described in the Depths Account.

67 In the source the word appears twice *במלך במלך* — "like a king, like a king."

68 A combination of Eccles 3:1 ("For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven") and Eccles 7:14, "God has made the one as well as the other"). On the former verse, Rashi writes: "Every matter'—to every thing, all things are called matter [*hafazim*] in mishnaic language."

[§46] Twelve simple [letters]: *He, Waw, Zayin, Het, Tet, Yod, Lamed, Nun, Samek, Ayin, Sade, Qof*. Twelve and not eleven. [Twelve and not thirteen].<sup>69</sup>

\* [§47; 5.1] Their measure is twelve diagonal lines: the north eastern line, the south-eastern line, . . . And they expand continually<sup>70</sup> for ever and ever and *they are the arms of the universe* (based on Deut 33:27).

\* [§48a; 5.2] He made them a sort of lawsuit, he arranged them in battle array, *one opposite the other God made them* (Qoh 7:14).

[§48b; 6.2] Three – each one stands by itself; seven are at loggerheads – three against three, and one is the law which holds the balance between them.

\* Twelve stand in battle array: three love but three hate; three give life but three kill. And the divine, trustworthy king rules over them all

One on top of three, and three on top of seven, and seven on top of twelve. And they all adhere to each other.

## 6. The Third Account: The Covenant

### The Sefirot

This account is written in particularly poetic language, which over the generations captivated the hearts of many people. Its writing is characterized by an abundance of parallelisms, by attention to euphony (rhythm and sound of the words), as well as to rich visual imagery. Particularly well-known is the formula of an explicit stylistic nature—“ten and not nine, ten and not eleven.”

[§3; 1.2] Ten *sefirot belimah*. Like the number of the ten fingers—five opposite five, and the covenant of the Unique One is exactly in the middle, in the covenant of the tongue and the circumcision of the flesh.

[§4; 1.4] Ten *sefirot belimah*. Ten and not nine, ten and not eleven. Understand Wisdom, and become wise in regard to Understanding. Test them and investigate them, and set up the thing on its proper place and return the Creator (*Yozer*) to His throne.

[§5; 1.8] Ten *sefirot belimah*. Restrain your mouth from speaking, restrain your heart from thinking. And if your heart races return to the place [which you have left], for thus it is written: (like) *running and returning* (Ezek. 1:14). And concerning this matter the covenant was made.

[§6; 1.7] Ten *sefirot belimah*. Their end (*sofan*) is fixed in their beginning [and their beginning in their end] as the flame is bound to the burning coal. For the

<sup>69</sup> The addition in brackets is taken from Source A (long text), and see n. 7 above.

<sup>70</sup> מרחיבים והוכיין — based on *b. Hagiga 12a*, “the sea got wider and wider.” Compare this to the discussion in the Sealing Account, above, near n. 30.

Lord is unique, and he has none second to him; and before one, what can you count?

[§8; 1.6] Ten *sefirot belimah*. Gazing upon them is quick as lightning [or: their aspect is like the sight of lightning]... And His word is in them *as though running and returning* (Ezek. 1:14), and they pursue His command like the storm wind, and before His throne they bow down.

There is no doubt that this account focuses particularly on the human viewpoint: on the difficulty in principle in perceiving the *sefirot*, but also on the wonderful attainment of one who, despite all, succeeds in doing so, if even for a fraction of a second. A person requires great wisdom, extraordinary understanding; it is fitting that a man devote his life to searching out a matter which it is impossible to fully investigate, to plumb that which is without end. Then, if he merits to see, to perceive the *sefirot* in a vision, he must hold back from continuing his thought and contemplation, but remove himself from the experience—all the more so that he must refrain from speaking of it.<sup>71</sup> The duality of this sectarian ethics stands out particularly here—in a text which reveals and simultaneously warns against revealing, in which both the sectarianism and the Jewishness of this sect are alluded to in the concept of the Covenant, and particularly in the covenant of the tongue.<sup>72</sup> The Covenant Account presents as its point of departure the enormous tension, the lack of resolution between the revealed and the hidden, between revelation and concealment, a tension that runs like a thread throughout the history of Jewish mysticism, and is particularly well-known in connection with the mishnah *Ein Dorshin* (in the second chapter of *Hagiga*).<sup>73</sup>

But the experience is fragile and fragmented, not only due to the limits of human comprehension, but also because of the very nature of the *sefirot belimah* themselves. They are themselves in constant motion: “they pursue his command like the storm wind,” and in a brief moment they halt themselves and prostrate themselves before God. And more generally: just as the heart which contemplates them runs back and forth to its place, so too are they in a constant state of “running and returning.”<sup>74</sup>

But what are these entities of whom one can say that “they pursue his command like the storm wind,” and who even halt and bow down? It seems highly doubtful whether one can describe the elements of nature or the dimensions of time, space

71 And one should note the equivocal nuances in the phrase - “Concerning this thing the covenant was made.” The root meaning “thing” (*db'r*) is the same as that for “word” or “speech”; while the root *krt* implies both making a covenant as well as cutting or stopping.

72 It has been drawn to its sectarian nature in particular by Ithamar Gruenwald (Gruenwald, “Notes,” 486-488).

73 *m. Hagiga* 2.1, and cf. the words of Ben Sira quoted at the beginning of this paper. Particularly extensive literature has been written about this tension; see, most recently, Halbertal, *Seter ve-Giluy*.

74 One should take note that this expression appears twice in the Covenant Account. Yehudah Liebes has already called attention to the nature of the human experience in this passage. See Liebes, *Torat ha-Yezirah*, Ch. 8, and see there for further details.

and ethics, mentioned in the previous accounts, in this fashion. The answer seems to be that they are some kind of angels (or perhaps they ought to be referred to as princes? or at the very least as supernatural forces?). Indeed, these *sefirot* are depicted in terms that in the Book of Ezekiel are reserved for the Holy Creatures; it is the angels who always set out on God's mission, and of whom one may therefore say that "his word is in them," or even to celebrate the description of their being ready for activity at a word—for not only do they flee like a storm at His word, but they do so with humility and reverence. Finally, we should note that, like the Sealing Account and many other sources, the author of the Covenantal Account claims that these angels are made out of burning fire.<sup>75</sup>

But while it seems to follow from all these passages that one is speaking of many angels, the repeated introductory phrase qualifies this statement: the text is dealing with only ten angels, those ten referred to as the "ten *sefirot belimah*." It should be emphasized that the author of this account does not elaborate anywhere just what is distinct about each one of the ten; the description remains an overall one.

However, the *sefirot* are described in the Covenant Account in an additional way. The first passage (§3; 1.3) specifically describes them as a single entity with an anthropomorphic structure.<sup>76</sup> "Ten *sefirot belimah*. Like the number of the ten fingers—five opposite five, and the covenant of the Unique One is exactly in the middle, in the covenant of the tongue and the circumcision of the flesh." The fingers of that same great figure are mentioned in particular (perhaps in the bodily gesture of Priestly Blessing?). Nor is it for naught that the sign of the covenant is mentioned here, corresponding to the sign of the covenant obligating those who dwell below, whether one is speaking of a sectarian covenant or that of the nation.

In either event, another passage sheds light on the nature of that anthropomorphic figure. At the beginning of this passage the author of the Covenant Account turns to his confidante and asks him—"Understand Wisdom" – that is, to deepen his understanding of a specific entity called Wisdom. The continuation of his appeal, "test them and investigate them [i.e., the *sefirot*]" is a full parallel, as Wisdom is identical to the ten *sefirot*. The continuation of this address to his confidante delimits by means of a further parallel the result of this subjective process: "and set up the thing<sup>77</sup> on its proper place and return the Creator (*Yozer*) to his throne." Wisdom, which is identical to the ten *sefirot*, which is equivalent to

75 See particularly the designation of these supreme entities in III Enoch as "hewers of fire" (Schäfer, *Synopse*, §9).

76 Perhaps this is the focus of R.Saadya Gaon's veiled criticism of the anthropomorphic structure of *Sefer Yezirah*. See Ben-Shammai, "Saadya", 6–9.

77 On *hadavar* ("thing" or "word"), see above, n.71; Prov 25.2; and several times in Rabbinic Literature, e.g., b. *Hagiga* 12a.

the “thing,” which is the Creator (*Yozer*), will be set firmly on its throne! The power of man’s thought thus has theurgic influence over this cosmic figure.<sup>78</sup> This being so, it may be treated as an obligation, or at very least as the obligation of special individuals, to set it properly. In any event, as he is called the Creator (*Yozer*), the author of the Covenant Account would seem to refer here to a figure taken from one of the intellectual sources of the Gnostic Demiurge: namely, the “Author of Creation; *Yozer Bereshit*.” From this, as well, it is clear that the book’s title, *Sefer Yezirah*, “the Book of Creation,” is the most suitable and natural name.<sup>79</sup> In any event, it follows from the identity between the ten *sefirot*, who are angels, and the Author of Creation, who has fingers and a covenantal organ, that one is speaking here of angels in human form;<sup>80</sup> or, to formulate it otherwise, of a single, great, anthropomorphic angel composed of many angels, reminiscent in particular of Alithea, of the Gnostic Marcos.<sup>81</sup>

The author of the Covenant Account presents a system of ten *sefirot* without enumerating what they are or how they differ from one another. Nevertheless, here too one may also see a three-fold division between the lines of his description. Thus, when the author argues that – “Ten *sefirot belimah*. Like the number of the ten fingers – five opposite five, and the covenant of the Unique One exactly in the middle” (§3; 1.3), he is in practice describing a division into right, left and center. Further on, when we discuss that part of the account dealing with the letters, this last conceptual model shall repeat itself.

Before concluding our discussion of the *sefirot* in the Covenant Account, we shall turn our attention to the unique stylistic formula which became noted in connection with *Sefer Yezirah* in general but which, in practice, only appears in this account. “Ten *sefirot belimah*. Ten and not nine, ten and not eleven.” I wish to suggest that this formula is a variation of the model of numerical sayings.<sup>82</sup> This model appears in various parts of the Bible, but particularly in the Wisdom Literature<sup>83</sup>—both in that branch dealing with theoretical speculations and in that concerned with ethical behavior, two central concerns of the discussions in *Sefer Yezirah*. A biblical example of the former category is found in those verses dealing with the qualities of God. “Once God has spoken; twice have I heard this: that power belongs to God; and that to thee, O Lord, belongs steadfast love” (Ps 62:12). An example of the second category is “There are six things which the Lord hates, seven which are an abomination to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands

78 See Idel, *Golem*, chap. 2.

79 Cf. Ben-Shammai, “Saadya”, 3–4.

80 As in Idel’s paper of that name; see there for numerous examples.

81 That is, that which is customarily referred to in Kabbalistic research (following Scholem’s definition) by the name “theurgy” refers here to the relation between man and the world of angels instead of to that between man and God.

82 For a general discussion of this pattern, both in Wisdom Literature and in other parts of the Bible, see Zakovitch, *Al sheloshah ve-al Arba’ah*; Roth, “Numerical Sayings.”

83 Roth, *ibid.*, esp. 2, 52-59, 88-100.

that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that make haste to run to evil, a false witness who breathes out lies, and a man who sows discord among brothers” (Prov 6:16-19). Some of these cases are specifically connected to the genre of riddles.<sup>84</sup> Thus, for example, “Three things are too wonderful for me; four I do not understand: the way of an eagle in the sky, the way of a serpent on a rock, the way of a ship on the high seas, and the way of a man with a maiden” (Prov 30:18-19). And perhaps we should add that the characteristic stylistic model of *Sefer Yezirah* was also created as an alternative to the numerical pattern characteristic of biblical riddles, in the sense of a protest whose entire essence lies in its giving an answer to the riddle, in resolving the “wondrous and hidden things.” After the Bible, as well, this numerical model was widespread.<sup>85</sup> This is particularly true of *Mishnah Abot*, which also belongs to Wisdom Literature. In practice, most of it, whether explicitly or using more covert models, falls into this literary category. One example shall suffice: “Simeon the Righteous... used to say: On three things the world stands: on Torah, on the [Divine] Service and on acts of kindness.”<sup>86</sup>

In the formal pattern widely used in the Bible, this model includes two parts: a heading, stating both the number of items to be mentioned and their common characteristic; and the actual list of items, listed one after another, at times with an ordinal number.<sup>87</sup> Precisely the same pattern is found in all three accounts of *Sefer Yezirah*. The heading of §10 (1.9), for example, is “ten *sefirot* [*belimah*]”: that is, it indicates the number of items—ten—and their shared characteristic—that they are *sefirot belimah*. It proceeds from there to enumerate them: “One—the Spirit of the Living God. Two... air from spirit,” and so on. All of *Sefer Yezirah* is made up of a combination of sections constructed on this model, and the discussion of the thirty-two paths among them.

Moreover, as in *Sefer Yezirah*, the Biblical lists are also frequently lists composed of two, three, seven, ten or twelve items.<sup>88</sup> These numbers have, among other things, explicit mnemonic values,<sup>89</sup> but within the framework of theoretical speculations their fixing is of ideational significance in its own right. See the following remarks of Roth:

The numerical saying can be defined as a type of list. What distinguishes it from all other types of lists is the use of a numerical value in the title-line. The numerical element adds a limiting factor and emphasizes the fact that a certain, exactly defined number of items shares this or that characteristic feature with

84 See Rofé, *Mavo*, 435-437.

85 For examples, see, e.g., Roth, *op. cit.*, 55-58, 90-93.

86 *m. Abot* 1.2; for many additional examples, see the above-mentioned studies of Zakovitch and of Roth.

87 On the formal nature of this pattern, see Roth, *ibid.*, 5-7.

88 Roth, *ibid.*, 94-95 and Zakovitch, *‘Al Sheloshah*, throughout the book.

89 One should also relate this to the claim that these numerical sayings have characteristics of oral literature (Zakovitch, *Sheloshah*, 3-7; Roth, *Numerical Sayings*, 1), and this may be indicative of the background of our account.

each other. This added numerical factor is of comparatively little importance in a narrative setting but of great importance in reflective and hortative numerical sayings. In the reflective use of the pattern the number is that device through which an existing (or seemingly existing) and discovered structural order in different phenomena of nature, life, society etc. is defined and fixed. Here the numerical value is the result of reflection and appears as the desired outcome of the reflection.<sup>90</sup>

This description by Roth seems to fit precisely the spirit of that variation of the Biblical formulae presented by *Sefer Yezirah*: “Ten *sefirot belimah*. Ten and not nine, ten and not eleven.”

In this context, we should also mention that Gershom Scholem interpreted the term *sefirot* in a neo-Pythagorean context, as alluding to numbers.<sup>91</sup> Yehudah Liebes suggested interpreting this term in the sense of “things that are counted.”<sup>92</sup> Indeed, one may strengthen this additional suggestion, both in light of the speculative background suggested by the Sages in their discussions of the enumerated “things upon which the world stands,”<sup>93</sup> and in light of the generic background mentioned in the previous sections. One should note in particular the conjecture of Alexander Rofé, that sayings based upon a numerical model were already called by the Rabbis *מאמר ספורות*, *ma’amar sefurot*, “a saying (of things that are) counted.”<sup>94</sup> The creation of such sayings seems to have been characteristic of one of the educated groups within Jewry, the *sofrim* (usually translated as “scribes”), and followed by the activity of the creators of the Masorah, the textural tradition. According to this conjecture, *Sefer Yezirah* presents a classification and cataloging of different elements in the world on the basis of specific criteria, just as the creators of the Masorah catalogued the Biblical texts according to numbered groups. Some of these groups had ready-made names—“letters,” with all of their divisions; but one of the more complex categories that did not have a general name was therefore referred to in the most general possible way, by the name *sefurot* or *sefirot*.

In the first part of this account, the author of the Covenant Account presents a system which is entirely theological. The *belimah*, or wisdom, upon which he hangs the entire world, is evidently the Author of Creation, or angels who are included within Him (or perhaps also those who stand outside of him). This account does not mention the laws of nature; it does not mention natural elements in this world or in the supernal world. The angels set out on their

90 Roth, *ibid.*, p. 8.

91 See, e.g., Scholem, “Jewish Gnosis,” esp. 23-26.

92 Liebes, *Torat ha-Yezirah*, Ch. 2.

93 See the last paragraphs, and especially near n. 10 above.

94 Rofé, Mavo, 435. The reference is to j. Sheqalim 5.1 (Sussman ed., col. 618) and he continues by suggesting that this term may already be found in the Bible; see Ps 71:15.

mission appointed by God, and this suffices to explain what happens in the world!

## The Letters

Already in the previous section, dealing with the *sefirot*, we identified a three-fold structure in the Covenant Account, even if it was not entirely explicit: “Ten *sefirot belimah*. Like the number of the ten fingers, five opposite five, and the covenant of the Unique One is exactly in the middle in the covenant of the tongue and the circumcision of the flesh” (§3; 1.3). The pattern is: right hand, left hand, and the tongue and covenantal organ located in the center. The conceptual view implicit in this visual pattern is connected with mediating, with bridging, and might be formulated as a joining together of the opposed elements, that is, as conditioning the very existence of the thing—or, alternatively, as creating a balance among the different elements. This pattern is clearly different from the binary pattern which we discerned in the Depths Account.

This three-fold pattern is clearly expressed in that part of the account dealing with letters: “the scale of acquittal and the scale of guilt, and the tongue of law holds the balance between them” (§23; 3.1). Instead of the two hands and the organ of the covenant, there is now posed the image of a scales—two pans and a pointer between them. To this, there are also added the contexts of the idea of scales—equity, law, and justice. It is also possible that the unusual idiom, *לשון חק*, *leshon hoq* (“the tongue of the law”), rather than *leshon moznayim* (“the tongue of the scales”), is influenced by the Arabic word *haq*,<sup>95</sup> which carries a range of meanings related to ideas of truth and justice, and which fits in well with this important characteristic of Wisdom Literature.<sup>96</sup> In any event, it appears from this that the archaic cosmic structure is “balanced”; hence, the implication is that lack of righteousness or lack of balance—that is, evil—comes from another place: possibly, an allusion to the acts of human beings.<sup>97</sup>

In the discussion of the three “mothers,” one finds certain expressions of some of the aspects discussed above: mediacy, bridging, balancing, justice, the joining together of opposed elements and providing a possibility for their existence. The three “mothers” represent the three elements: fire, wind/air, and water. One ought to note that the approach suggested here is different from that of the Sealing Account. In the Sealing Account, there is described (in the framework of some of the *sefirot*) a process of flow (or perhaps emanation?) in which spirit is the most sublime entity, and from it flow out air/wind, fire and water. Here, by contrast, fire is

<sup>95</sup> As has already been noted by, e.g., Alloni, “Zunz,” 55.

<sup>96</sup> See above, n. 20.

<sup>97</sup> On the possible nexus of the Muslim “Science of Balance” (8th to 10th centuries) see Wasserstrom, “Further Thoughts,” 216–217.

clearly the most sublime element, water the least so, while the task of mediacy and joining falls upon the air. As in the other accounts, here too the text adds another division into categories: universe, year, and soul albeit here these categories include fewer elements than those which exist in the Sealing Account. In each of these categories, the elements work in a different way. The picture drawn of the manner of activity of the different elements is as follows:

Letters	Elements	Universe	Year (Time)	Soul (Person)
<i>Shin</i>	Fire	Heaven	Heat	Head
<i>Alef</i>	Air/wind	Air/wind	Humidity	Chest
<i>Mem</i>	Water	Earth	Cold	Belly

This table could also serve for our description of the text of the Sealing Account, but in practice, even if the formal list of the building blocks and their products is identical in the two accounts, the lawfulness acting therein is different. In the Sealing Account there were depicted (in the framework of some of the letters) processes by means of the verbs *zrf* (“to combine,” that is, to combine letters) and *htm* (“to seal”). Thus, while fire in fact creates the heavens, this is so only through a certain combination of the other two letters, and not by itself—and so on. As against that, here two elements, fire and water, are each depicted as being created separately, while the third element, the air or spirit, is described as “holding the balance between them.”

Of the passages about the seven double-letters, §38 (4.3) would appear to belong to the Covenant Account. This is so because, first of all, as we have seen, the description of the seven “edges” as seven dimensions in space is inconsistent with the other two accounts; second, because it contains a linguistic phrase that also appears in the section of this account dealing with the *sefirot*: namely, that there the “covenant of the Unique One” is placed in the middle (*mekhuvenet ba-emza*) (§3; 1.3), just as here the Holy Tabernacle is in the middle (*mekhuvan ba-emza*). This point also brings us to distinguish the conceptual similarity: here too, the middle has an important function in joining or bridging together the other elements. This function finds expression in this passage in the claim that the Holy Temple “supports them all”—that is, all of the “edges” or “extremities”. This is similar to certain Rabbinic sources which see in the *Even ha-Shetiyah*, the Corner Stone of the Temple, the place upon which the world is based.<sup>98</sup>

It is interesting to note that, despite the fact that we are speaking of seven letters, each one of which can be articulated in two different forms, here too, similar to the author of the Sealing Account, the author of the Covenant Account

<sup>98</sup> b. *Yoma* 54b, and compare with the other two accounts; for discussion, see near nn. 29 and 56.

relates only to the fact that there are seven, and not fourteen. The Depths Account is the only one that relates to the duplication as such. However, similar to the Depths Account (and in contrast to the Sealing Account), the author of the Covenant Account does not draw any specific connection between a given letter and a given entity. From this point of view, any other seven different signs could serve the same purpose.<sup>99</sup>

In several versions the following sentence appears prior to the description in the Covenant Account of the seven double letters: "Seven double letters: *Bet, Gimel, Dalet; Kaph, Pe, Resh, Taw*. Seven and not six, seven and not eight" (§38; 4.2). Peter Hayman emphasizes that this sentence does not appear in the short version of *Sefer Yezirah*, for which reason it would appear to be a later addition whose purpose is to create stylistic harmony with the beginning of the book. In strengthening his claim, he mentions that this phenomenon (i.e., the existence of a given formula in the long version but not in the short version) repeats itself with regard to the twelve simple letters, a stylistic feature completely lacking in the description of the "mothers."<sup>100</sup> Nevertheless, one cannot ignore the fact that this formula is included, not only in the long version, but also in that of R. Saadya Gaon; our suggestion is further strengthened by the fact that it appears specifically as an introduction to a passage which apparently belongs to the Covenant Account. Is it possible that the author of the long version received a fuller text than that which survived as the "short version"? I would tend to support this possibility.

We have already discussed the difficulties raised by the Depths Account's discussion of the twelve simple letters, and have suggested that some of these passages may have been lost or that one of the accounts borrowed material from another. We shall not return to those passages which have already been discussed, but shall now bring the entire combined text.

The following, then, is the discussion of the letters within the framework of the Covenant Account:

[Three "Mother-Letters"]

[§23; 3.1] Three mothers—*Alef, Mem, Shin*. Their basis is the scale of acquittal and the scale of guilt, and the tongue of law holds the balance between them.

[§25; 6.1] Three – fire, water and air/wind (*ruah*); fire above, water below, and air/wind (*ruah*) is between them, And this is a sign for the matter, that fire evaporates [or: carries up] water.

[§26; 6.1] Three mothers – *Alef, Mem, Shin*. *Mem* [is silent], and *Shin* hisses, and *Alef* holds the balance between them.

<sup>99</sup> See above, near n. 62.

<sup>100</sup> See Hayman's remarks on §46.

[§28; 3.3] Three mothers – *Alef, Mem, Shin* – in the universe: air/wind (*ruah*), and water and fire. Heaven was created first from fire, and earth was created from water, and [air] (*avir*) was created from the wind (*ruah*), holding the balance between them.

[§29; 3.4] Three mothers – *Alef, Mem, Shin* – in the year: fire, and water and air/wind (*ruah*). Heat was created from fire, and cold was created from water, and humidity from air/wind (*ruah*) holding the balance between them.

[§30; 3.4] Three mothers – *Alef, Mem, Shin* – in the soul. The head was created from fire, the belly from water, and the chest<sup>101</sup> from air holding the balance between them.

[Seven double letters]

[§38; 4.2] Seven double [letters]: *Bet, Gimel, Dalet; Kaph, Pe, Resh, Tav*. Seven and not six; seven and not eight.<sup>102</sup>

[§38; 4.3] Seven double [letters]: *Bet, Gimel, Dalet; Kaph, Pe, Resh, Tav*. Six edges of place, and the holy place set within the middle. One– the upper edge, two– the lower edge, three– the eastern edge, four– the western edge, five– the northern edge, six – the southern edge. And the seventh edge is the eternal edge, and the holy temple set in the middle and it supports them all.<sup>103</sup>

[Twelve Simple Letters]

The following passages were evidently included as the result of the mixing of materials from the Depths Account with the Covenant Account. Those sections which were almost certainly adopted by the author of the Covenant Account are indicated by an asterisk.

\* [§45; 5.1] Twelve simple [letters]: *He, Waw, Zayin, Het, Tet, Yod, Lamed, Nun, Samek, Ayin, Sade, Qof*. Their basis is sight, hearing, smelling, talking, eating, sexual intercourse, action, walking, anger, laughter, thought, sleep.

\* [§46] Twelve simple [letters]: *He, Waw, Zayin, Het, Tet, Yod, Lamed, Nun, Samek, Ayin, Sade, Qof*. Twelve and not eleven, [twelve and not thirteen.]<sup>104</sup>

\* [§47; 5.1] Their measure is twelve diagonal lines: the north eastern line, the south-eastern line... And they expand continually for ever and ever and *they are the arms of the universe* (cf. Deut.33:27).

[§48a; 5.2] He made them a sort of lawsuit, he arranged them in battle array, *one opposite the other God made them* (Eccl 7:14).

[§48b; 6.3] Three – each one stands by itself.

\* Seven are at loggerheads – three against three, and one [is the law which] holds the balance between them.

101 The chest is connected to air and to speech and as such is connected to the covenant of the tongue, with its balancing aspect.

102 This reading is taken from Source A (long version); and cf. n. 7 above.

103 Brought according to the version of Source S (short version), and see n. 7 above.

104 This text is taken from Source A (long version) and see n. 7 above.

Twelve stand in battle array: three love but three hate; three give life but three kill. And the divine, trustworthy king rules over them all

One on top of three, and three on top of seven, and seven on top of twelve. And they all adhere to each other.

## 7. The Editing

In this paper we have portrayed *Sefer Yezirah* as a book whose editor presents a certain problem for discussion at the beginning, and in the course of the work offers three different solutions, three “accounts” of the Creation and of its nature; three accounts of the *belimah* upon which the earth is suspended.

From the point of view presented in this paper, the Sealing Account reflects a practitioner of magic of broad perspective who, on the one hand, seeks the Holy Spirit and, on the other, seeks practical attainments (perhaps to create a golem? or to write amulets?). Together with these, he also wishes to utilize astrology. As part of his broad worldview, he attempts to comprehend the building blocks of the universe (letters, water, air, fire, and so forth), and its laws (for example, how God rules through the act of sealing the cosmic chaos).

The Depths Account, by contrast, seems to represent the approach of a worldly person, a member of the conservative establishment, for whom understanding a few basic principles of the Creation is sufficient.

The Covenant Account presents the visionary, a man of spirit and poetic temperament, who confines himself to the narrow world of his own sect. From what is extant of his writings,<sup>105</sup> at least from the view-point discussed in this paper, he does not display any longing for accomplishments in the practical arena of life, albeit he does reveal some interest in the intellectual understanding of the structure of the world and its laws. But in principle there is only one subject that is his highest yearning—to join the dance of the angels, to run back and forth like them in their longing for the Creator. They, as he puts it, pursue His word like the storm wind, and he seeks the fragile, tempting and fascinating experience of that which is not and which is: the *belimah* upon which the world is suspended.

With which of these views does the editor identify? Or does he, perhaps, maintain a studied neutrality?

It seems to me that one can say two things about the editing of this book. While the history of *Sefer Yezirah* undoubtedly entailed a long, gradual, complex process involving the addition of numerous glosses, the essential core of the book is based upon a deliberate process of editing. This statement is implied by the very structure of this paper, which traces all parts of the different accounts, and notes

<sup>105</sup> For an allusion to the possibility of some loss, see below, after the text of n. 127.

the high degree of cohesiveness of its components. Second, the editor identifies with the Sealing Account, so much so that it seems that the two are one and the same.

This last statement is based upon the observation that the activity of editing is particularly discernible in relation to the conceptual world of the Sealing Account. This is already recognizable at the beginning of the book, where the editor “presents” the problem for discussion (§1; 1.1). God’s activity in the world is described by means of the verb *hq’q*, “to carve,” a verb found exclusively in the Sealing Account. Some versions of this opening section mention ten names of God. Among all these names, only one combination, “the living God,” appears in the rest of the book—that is, in the Sealing Account itself.<sup>106</sup> Further along in the book, there are two additional passages which bear the nature of an editorial insertion or summation. The one summarizes the discussion of the ten *sefirot* (§16; 1.14), the other, that of the twenty-two letters (§56; 5.4)—both of them specifically in the spirit of the Sealing Account.

The concluding passage is written in full identification with the message of the Sealing Account, but in the course of doing so incorporates an impressive group of linguistic elements also taken from the Covenant Account. This feature lends a harmonistic atmosphere to this summary, implying an appreciation of the value of the latter account. It displays an attitude of respect, a sense of continuity and development of ideas, where in practice a somewhat harmonistic atmosphere exists from the outset by the very process of editing, through which all three accounts are integrated into one.

The concluding section explicitly clarifies what may have already been felt between the lines—namely, that *Sefer Yezirah* was intended for concrete realization in human life. The archetype of this application is the Patriarch Abraham, who followed in the path of *Sefer Yezirah* and “succeeded in doing so.” Some of the verbs mentioned here characterize the magical and activist spirit of the author of the Sealing Account—He carved and hewed, combined and formed—and also “bound twenty letters unto his tongue,” an allusion to the Holy Spirit, suiting the verbal nature of this account. To this one should add those verbs characteristic of the visionary and meditative spirit of the author of the Covenant Account—“Abraham our father gazed (*zf’h*) and looked, and saw, and investigated, and understood.”

One should note that the two latter verbs, in practice, underlie the general framework of the book as whole, by virtue of the involvement in the question of Wisdom. Based upon the claim presented in this passage, all the verbs mentioned thus far relate to activities which man initiates in the framework of his spiritual strivings. The result of this activity is presented by means of a new verb: *גיה*, *gl’h*

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<sup>106</sup> See n. 33 above and near it.

(“revealed”): “the Lord of all was revealed to him”; “and the Omnipresent revealed to him his secret.”

This passage speaks extensively of the dual aspect of the covenant—the covenant of the nation and the covenant of the mystical circle; this may allude to the fact that the Sealing Account also reflects the atmosphere of a closed circle, similar to that of the Covenant Account.

Abraham’s efforts brought about an additional reward: great closeness between himself and God, and his being considered the lover (*ohavo*) of God—similar to Yedidiah, “beloved of God,” the honorific name that was given to Solomon,<sup>107</sup> with all its associations to Wisdom Literature. This subject constitutes a connection to the mystical literature of the first millennium, as in the *Shiur Qomah* literature the mystic is also referred to by the name *yedid*.<sup>108</sup>

The book concludes with an ecstatic description of success, as understood by the Sealing Account. And indeed, Abraham succeeded in combining and unifying between the vessels of his activity and their results: letters were drawn down and flowed until they became water, literally, or else they became air and fire, made clamor and burned. Moreover, Abraham succeeded in dominating and guiding the activities of the constellations of the zodiac.<sup>109</sup>

This is the text of the concluding section:

[§61; 6.4] When Abraham our father gazed (*zf’h*) and looked, and saw, and investigated, and understood, and carved, and hewed, and combined, and formed, and succeeded, the Lord of all was revealed to him. And He made him sit in His lap, and kissed him upon his head. He called him His lover [cf. Isa 41:8] and named him His son, and made a covenant with him and his seed for ever. *And he trusted in the Lord, and it was accounted to him for righteousness* (Gen.15:6). He made with him a covenant between the ten toes of his feet – it was the covenant of circumcision. He made with him a covenant between the ten fingers of his hands – it was the covenant of the tongue. He bound twenty[-two] letters to his tongue, and the Omnipresent revealed to him His secret.<sup>110</sup> He drew them out<sup>111</sup> into water, he burned them into fire, he shook them into the air, he branded them into the seven,<sup>112</sup> he led them into the twelve constellations.<sup>113</sup>

107 1 Sam 12:28.

108 Cohen, *Shiur Qomah*, 15–16, 43 ff.

109 Cf. the very interesting analyses of this passage in Liebes, *Torat ha-Yezirah*, Part 4; idem., *Het’o shel Elisha*, 102–104.

110 Hayman’s edition reads here: סודו (His secret). But in *Yezirah*, ed. Levin-Epstein, יסודו — that is, the basis of the letters.

111 מִשְׁכָּן נִמְסִים — in the source: מִשְׁכָּן בָּאֵשׁ כְּנִימִים, “he draw them out of the fire like water.”

112 i.e., seven stars.

113 It should be emphasized that the seven stars and twelve constellations are mentioned explicitly only in the Sealing Account. They are alluded to in the Depths Account, but not explicitly. Note also that ten verbs describe Abraham’s actions and ten others – God’s actions.

One conclusion that follows obviously from the assertion that the author of the Sealing Account is the editor of the book is this: that the Sealing Account is the latest of the three, and that it was written in relation to the other two. This conclusion strengthens what has already emerged from our discussion of the concluding passage of the book, particularly in relation to the author of the Sealing Account and the Covenant Account—namely, that one sees in the book an attitude of respect and continuity towards a particular intellectual tradition, while renewing and enriching it.

This commitment to the “chain of tradition” may explain a number of matters in which there appears to be a certain intellectual inconsistency in the Sealing Account. Notwithstanding the general claim of *Sefer Yezirah* that Wisdom has thirty-two paths, ten *sefirot*, and twenty-two letters, in this account the twenty-two letters are derived from the second *sefirah* (§12; 1.6). In practice, the author of the Sealing Account reduced the number of elements that comprise Wisdom—it is divided into ten *sefirot*, the letters and all other entities being derived therefrom.<sup>114</sup> The three elements—air, water, and fire—also appear once as the three supernal and most important *sefirot* (§§12-14; 1.6-12), while further on (§§32-34; 3.6-8) they appear a second time as part of a rather vague and somewhat hazy description that obscures the contradiction in the description of the combinations of letters that seal various aspects of universe, time and soul. Likewise, three of the simple letters are in one passage connected to the description of the seals of the *sefirot* (§15; 1.13) and another time to a description of the zodiac (§52; 5.2).

The most likely explanation of this inconsistency is that, within the framework of an account which in itself has a very definite stylistic unity, the editor attempted to continue the “chain of tradition” presented him by means of the Covenant Account. This tradition included at least the following elements: the claim regarding the existence of Wisdom that mediates between God and the world, and upon which the world stands; the division of Wisdom into ten *sefirot belimah* and twenty-two letters; the division of the letters into three categories of “mothers,” double letters, and simple letters; and the connection between the “mothers” and the three categories of universe, year (time), and soul (person). From this point on, the author of the Sealing Account creates a new picture, one that is far richer and has far-reaching practical implications.

We shall now turn our attention to the fact that, in practice, the Depths Account also relates to the Covenant Account. This is particularly recognizable in the manner in which it accepted the tradition connecting between the three “mothers” and the three categories of universe, year, and soul, but simultaneously adapted them (without any particular attempt to hide the points where it was “stitched”

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<sup>114</sup> This contradiction may be explained by an alternative explanation—that this reduction only appears in one isolated sentence (§12; 1.6). It may therefore simply be a later gloss. See also in n. 29.

together) to his own intellectual interest—i.e., his own lack of interest in the three elements of fire, water, and air—by turning the “mothers” into fathers.<sup>115</sup> From this point on, it is easy to discern that he also took from the Covenant Account the same elements as were accepted by the author of the Sealing Account. These were, in practice, those elements shared in common by all three accounts.

Finally: the Covenant Account is the earliest of the three and was the first one to present, within the framework of this specific “chain of tradition,” the basic assumptions common to them all. The Depth Account is later and builds its description through acceptance, rejection, and change of the tradition that was before him. This is likewise the case of the author of the Sealing Account, who is later than all of them, who unites and edits all three accounts together.<sup>116</sup>

## 8. A Comment About Context

The intellectual context of *Sefer Yezirah*, whether Jewish or foreign, is extremely rich, and its discussion by various thinkers fills thousands of pages. It is worthwhile adapting this discussion to the stratification of the book according to the three accounts discussed here, but that too is an enormous project upon which we cannot elaborate here. For the present we shall suffice with one brief comment on this subject, in the hope that we shall have an opportunity to discuss this subject in the future (including the most puzzling issue of all—the date of the writing of *Sefer Yezirah*).

The picture of the world presented in these three accounts is one which I would describe as a binitarian worldview—that is, one which asserts the existence of an entity secondary to God, which assists in the creation of the world and serves the purposes of ongoing mediation between God and the world.<sup>117</sup> In the Covenant Account, this entity is an angel, while in the other two accounts it is more abstract and involves other emphases, among which one should note in particular the areas of ethics and of physics. Alan Segal and Larry Hurtado have demonstrated that the earliest patterns of binitarian approaches already exist in the Bible, and are characterized by the fact that the secondary entity is an angel.<sup>118</sup> This pattern does not completely bypass the world of Judaism after the appearance of Christianity and Gnosis, but continues to exist within a sectarian mystical framework, at the margins of the Rabbinic establishment. The latter was opposed to binitarian

115 See the discussion above, near n. 60.

116 It is worth emphasizing that we discuss here only the relative chronology of the different accounts in relation to one another, and not their actual date.

117 As opposed to a dualistic approach, which emphasizes the tensions between God and the additional entity. On this concept see Segal, *Two powers*; Hurtado, *One God*.

118 Segal, *Two powers*, esp. 3-158; Hurtado, *One God*, esp. 1-40.

worldviews, primarily in order to separate itself from the rival religions.<sup>119</sup> These ideas were still current even centuries later, among Jews, Christians, Gnostics, Jewish-Christians, Samaritans and Karaites (e.g., the 9th century Benjamin al-Nahawandi).<sup>120</sup> The conclusion that follows from this paper is that the Covenant Account constitutes a new and fitting example of this tendency,<sup>121</sup> one that has thus far been unnoticed. Thanks to the exegetical transformations of the text, first in the framework of the other two accounts appearing in *Sefer Yezirah* itself, and thereafter by means of the abundance of both philosophical and Kabbalistic interpretations,<sup>122</sup> it succeeded in returning with great success to the bosom of the establishment.

Let us briefly mention two further examples of a binitarian approach within the literature of first millennium Jewish mysticism. Joseph Dan has noted in the past the connection existing in this literature between the angel Anpiel and the concept of the "Author of Creation," as names representing, depending upon the definition of its functions and its nature, the same auxiliary entity.<sup>123</sup> Note the following comparison, that appears explicitly in these texts: "Anpiel... as Maker of the World, Anpiel... as Author of Creation."<sup>124</sup> If this is so, one may also draw a connection between the characteristics of the Author of Creation, alluded to in the Covenant Account, and the characteristics of Anpiel.

Let us begin with a seemingly marginal detail, but one which suggests that there is perhaps such a connection between the traditions. In general, Anpiel is not mentioned frequently in this literature, making it interesting to note that in one of the sources his fingers are mentioned, specifically: "R. Akiva said: When I ascended,[in order] to gaze at the upper world, I saw in the paths of Heaven... Anpiel the Prince, who with the tips of his fingers played upon the the heaven, *Aravot*."<sup>125</sup> That is, the music of the heavens was played by his means. As mentioned earlier, the fingers of the Author of Creation are also mentioned in the Covenant Account. It is possible that the author of this account was also sensitive to musical tones, for his writing is very rhythmic and he often describes the intensive motion

119 See esp. Segal, *Two powers*, 182-205; Fossum, *The Name of God*.

120 Numerous studies have been written on this subject; see, e.g., the following works, which in turn contain extensive bibliography: Idel, *Kabbalah and Eros*, see index under "ditheism"; idem., *Ascensions*, 85; Fossum, "Kyrios Jesus"; idem., "The Angel of the Lord"; idem., "The Magharians"; Nemoj, *Karaite Anthology*, 19, 333; Wasserstrom, *Between Muslim and Jew*, 167-206; idem., "Sahraṣṭani on the Magariyya"

121 The sectarian aspect also emerged from the text itself; see above, near nn. 72-73.

122 See n. 1 above.

123 Dan, "Anpiel."

124 Schäfer, *Synopse*, §26; 245.

125 Schäfer, *Synopse*, §873. May this be an allusion to the Pythagorean idea of the connection between the heavenly spheres and music? R. Joseph Ashkenazi continued this line of thought at the beginning of his commentary on *Sefer Yezirah*, found in the Levin-Epstein edition. For a discussion of the devolution of this line of thought in the late Middle Ages, see Liebes, *Torat ha-Yezirah*, Ch. 17.

of the *sefirot*: they are described as “running and returning,” they pursue his command “like the storm wind, and before his throne they bow down.”

An important feature of the figure of Anpiel is his serving as guardian of the entrance to the highest sanctuary in the Heavenly Chambers. As such, he determines for which human beings the gate will be opened and to whom it will be closed; in particular, he was responsible for Enoch’s ascent to the heights of heaven.<sup>126</sup> That is, he plays a central function in the experience of the chosen son who succeeds in ascending heavenwards; or, in other words, in the connection of revelation between the supernal world and people of this world. Interestingly, most of the section dealing with the *sefirot* within the framework of the Covenant Account deals in practice, as we have seen, with the experience of revelation. It may be that the common tradition which underlies these things is that which creates the connection between the concept of the Author of Creation and the human experience.

Moreover, the status of Anpiel is explained by the fact that “the seals of heavens and earth are given over in his hand.” If one is indeed speaking of a similar tradition in the Covenant Account, then the source of the “seal” characteristic of the Sealing Account is already found there, with all the magical aspects involved in this concept.<sup>127</sup> This may also suggest that the original accounts include far more material than that which is extant today.

The second example is concerned with the *Shiur Qomah* literature. The “Creator” is a central term in this literature, and there is a scholarly debate as to what is meant by it. Does it relate to God Himself, or does it perhaps refer to some entity that is distinct from Him, which assists Him in the processes of creation? That is, does this literature represent a binitarian approach? This question raises in turn the issue of the connection to Gnosticism.<sup>128</sup> In any event, the discussion of the “Creator” is integrated in this literature within the description of the human experience: R. Ishmael ascends to Heaven and learns secrets “that are concealed from all human beings”; and he is also promised, on the threshold of his learning them, that “I shall tell you the dimensions of our Creator, may He be blessed.”<sup>129</sup> The subject of the measurements,<sup>130</sup> quantities and “calculations”<sup>131</sup> is also a central subject here, and these measurements, involving myriads upon myriads of parsangs and cubits, are repeatedly enumerated. This tendency is also strengthened by the citation of suitable verses from the Wisdom literature, similar to those mentioned at the beginning of this paper: “who has marked

126 Schäfer, *ibid.*, §9; 26, 245-247.

127 One ought to note that the term קצה, *qazeh* (“edge”), that appears in the Sealing Account in connection with the concept of the seal (§15; 1.13) also appears in the Covenant Account (§38; 5.3) and may therefore strengthen this conjecture.

128 See for example Gaster, “Das Shiur Komah”; Idel, “The World of Angels”; Scholem, “Shiur Komah”; *idem.*, *Major Trends*, 65.

129 Cohen, *Shiur Qomah*, 43, 52, etc.

130 See, e.g., Cohen, *ibid.*, 27 — מידת הקומה, *middat ha-qomah*, “the size of the body”.

131 See, e.g., *ibid.*, 28.

off the heavens with a span" (Isa 40:12), and so on.<sup>132</sup> In the Covenant Account, as in the *Shiur Qomah* literature, we thus find three components that go together: the phrase, "the Creator"; the human experience of direct or indirect encounter with the Creator (however this concept is understood); and the interest in the measurements of the Creator.

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Upon concluding this paper, one may say that if, at the beginning of our discussion, we argued that *Sefer Yezirah* deals with one exclusive subject—namely, the nature of Wisdom or *belimah* upon which the world hangs—at its end we might offer a different formulation. *Sefer Yezirah* deals with the details of a binitarian approach, asserting the existence of a secondary entity to God, one which assists Him in the creation of the world and serves as a mediator between them.

This book was created through the combination of three different answers to this question (in the language used in this paper, three "accounts"), edited into a single coherent whole. The contradictions in contents between the different accounts seem to have remained as they were, but the "stitches" connecting the different accounts to one another are not particularly recognizable, as all three were written in the stylistic pattern of a "numerical saying" and in all three there is a relatively high degree of rhythm.

In the worldview of the Covenant Account, which has a number of sectarian characteristics, there is a "unique Lord," there is a world, and there is an angel who "holds the balance between them," who joins them together and makes a covenant between them. To the author of this account, the most attractive aspect of the "covenant" is the ecstatic experience: just as the angels dance about dizzily, turn about and stop in the supernal world, so does his heart run back and forth and then stop.

The Depths Account reflects the process of integration within the establishment. This integration is made possible as the result of a number of changes. This account presents an ethical worldview of a conservative, establishment-oriented character. The secondary entity undergoes great abstraction; it is no longer considered as an angel (an unacceptable approach in the Rabbinic world), but has more abstract attributes—time, space and ethics. Likewise, the argument regarding the abstract nature of Wisdom, it being too deep to investigate and beyond the comprehension of human beings, negates the possibility of human experience thereof and the independent and underground aspect inherent within it.

The author of the Sealing Account took the earlier accounts, learned from them, reworked them, and edited them into a single, quite coherent unit. In many senses, the clock turned backwards in his hands, outside of the Rabbinic

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<sup>132</sup> Cohen, *ibid.*, 36, 51, and many more.

establishment. Once again one sees here interest in the experience of connection with the supernal worlds (this time, its main concern is evidently more verbal and not only visionary), to which is added a significant interest in magic. But this magic is to a large extent involved with the physical world, to the extent that the characteristics of this world stand out far more than those of magic. This attribute was evidently one of the reasons why this book's path into the establishment succeeded.

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## ELLIOT R. WOLFSON

# Structure, Innovation, and Diremptive Temporality: The Use of Models to Study Continuity and Discontinuity in Kabbalistic Tradition

### **Abstract:**

This study consists of two parts. The first is an examination of the hermeneutical presuppositions underlying the theory of models that Moshe Idel has applied to the study of Jewish mysticism. Idel has opted for a typological approach based on multiple explanatory models, a methodology that purportedly proffers a polychromatic as opposed to a monochromatic orientation associated with Scholem and the so-called school based on his teachings. The three major models delineated by Idel are the theosophical-theurgical, the ecstatic, and the magical or talismanic. Idel's hermeneutic rests on the assumption that the phenomenon of Jewish mysticism (as the phenomenon of religion more generally) cannot be essentialized, and therefore no one methodological approach should be privileged as the exclusive means to ascertain it. In the second part of this study, I raise the possibility that affirming set patterns of thought and a unified system of symbols that link together kabbalists from different historical periods might not inevitably implicate the scholar in a methodological reductionism. Moving beyond a binary logic, which is still operative in the postmodern dichotomy of truth and dissimulation, I surmise that the polysemic nature of the text that may be elicited from kabbalistic sources is not dependent on the rejection of laying claim to an inherent and original intent that is recoverable through proper philological attunement. Multivocality and essentialism are not mutually exclusive. Kabbalah, I submit, is a cultural-literary phenomenon that illustrates an open system in which each moment is a mix of newness and repetition, each event a renewed singularity. The hermeneutical praxis appropriate to this system displays a temporality linked to the conception of time in its most rudimentary form as an instant of diremptive reiteration, the repetition of the same as different in the renewal of the different as same. The tendency to generalize, therefore,

should not be misconstrued as viewing the variegated history of Jewish mystical doctrines and practices monolithically.

*Play is always lost when it seeks salvation in games.*

Jacques Derrida

In this study, I will examine the hermeneutical presuppositions underlying the theory of models that Moshe Idel has applied to the study of Jewish mysticism. A journal dedicated to Idel's academic achievements seems to me a most fitting context to undertake this discussion. On a personal side, I can relate that when I began to study with Professor Idel in the autumn of 1982, several years before the publication of his monumental *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, he would often communicate to me that his desire was to advance the field by creating an atmosphere of genuine dialogue and exchange of ideas rather than preserving a cult of personality wherein the reputation and alleged authority of certain figures overshadow or even eradicate the research of others. Indeed, one of the invaluable lessons I learnt from Idel in the early stages of my career as a graduate student was that criticism in the scholarly domain should not be viewed as a personal affront but rather as a sign of intellectual esteem. I am confident that the honoree of this volume would agree that the greatest respect that can be paid him as a scholar is serious engagement with the ideas communicated in his work. What more can a thinker desire than the opportunity for his or her ruminations to serve as stimuli to inspire further speculation? Heidegger notoriously made the connection between thinking (*denken*) and thanking (*danken*), reminding us that thought, in its most elemental nature, is a mode of thankfulness. Surely, thinking in the footsteps of another must be accorded the status of high praise. In that spirit of homage and gratitude, I offer the following reflections.

## From Essence to Model: Idel's Phenomenological Method

Of the many contributions that Idel has made to the study of the medieval esoteric and mystical tradition known as kabbalah, one of his most insistent methodological claims is that this phenomenon (even the use of the singular noun is problematic) is a conglomerate of different schools and tendencies and therefore any totalizing or monolithic interpretation must be rejected. Idel has opted for a typological approach based on multiple explanatory models, a methodology that purportedly proffers a polychromatic as opposed to a monochromatic orientation associated with Scholem and the so-called school based on his teachings. According to Idel,

what is necessary is a genuinely “variegated phenomenology” of kabbalah that would better attend to the “spiritual polymorphism in Jewish mysticism.”<sup>1</sup> Thus, in his *Messianic Mystics*, Idel refers to his approach as *synchronic polychromatism*, for it “emphasizes the multiplicity of messianic concepts and events while attempting a typology that will not only take in consideration diversity in one limited period of time but also organize the much larger spectrum of literatures and events into more unified categories, or models.”<sup>2</sup> The three major models delineated by Idel to study the phenomenon of messianism in Jewish mysticism are the theosophical-theurgical, the ecstatic, and the magical, a triad that will be well familiar to those who have read even a representative sample from his truly massive oeuvre. Idel further notes that synchronic polychromatism, as well as diachronic polychromatism, “should be organized into more unified diachronic conceptual schemes.”<sup>3</sup> By making this comment, Idel seeks to balance the competing claims to continuity and discontinuity in understanding the transmission and innovation of ideas in the history of Jewish mysticism. The diachronic conceptual schemes of which he speaks attend to what persists in the flow of time, and thereby neutralize the temptation to exaggerate the degree of novelty accorded the historicist orientation, whereas the synchronic dimension points to the innovative shifts that one can situate in any given historical context. That both “synchronic” and “diachronic” modify the word “polychromatism” suggests that Idel is advocating for multivalency in either temporal framing. That is, even if we presume that there are structures that endure through time, we should not deny on that account the variegated nature of the phenomena either in their synchronic or in their diachronic manifestations. We can posit the continuity of an idea or of a symbol, but this does not bespeak uniformity of an essentializing nature.

Although Idel himself does not frame matters in this way, in my judgment, it is consistent with the orientation he has articulated in numerous writings to correlate his use of diachronic and synchronic with the twofold character of temporality as linear and circular. The diachronic would naturally be linked to that which stretches as a line over different temporal-spatial periods and the synchronic to that which is consolidated as a point affixed in a particular interval of timespace. The convergence of the extended and punctiform modalities of time provides a discourse that would best tolerate multiplicity in a specific historical juncture as well as over a span of different moments. It is worth citing Idel’s precise formulation:

Indeed, the major methodological assumption informing many of the discussions below is that literatures, events, and the experiences expressing

1 Moshe Idel, “Kabbalah-Research: From Monochromatism to Orphism,” *Studia Judaica* 8 (1999): 15-46, esp. 27-32.

2 Moshe Idel, *Messianic Mystics* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 17.

3 Ibid.

and concerning Jewish messianism should be understood as displaying a great variety of ideas, concepts, modes, and models. The multidimensional nature of most of the messianic idea is quite evident, and it should be remembered that traditional concepts, found in the canonical writings, historical circumstances, personal aspirations, and apologetic and polemic stands conspired to produce the wide spectrum of messianic views which cannot be easily reduced to transformations, metamorphoses, or neutralizations of one basic “messianic idea.” I believe that the implicit assumption that one such monolithic idea was in existence and that it is possible to describe it over many centuries, while reducing all its disparate versions to the status of neutralizations and liquidations, is hardly plausible and quite suspect within a nonorthodox mode of discourse, as the academic one is supposed to be.<sup>4</sup>

The “monolithic idea” alluded to by Idel is a reference to the studies of Scholem on the messianic dimensions in the history of Jewish mysticism,<sup>5</sup> and especially his well-known thesis regarding the neutralization of this ideal in the East-European Hasidism that emerged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>6</sup> It is not my concern here to evaluate the accuracy of Idel’s portrayal of the views on messianism offered by Scholem,<sup>7</sup> let alone the opinions of those who purportedly follow the lead of the latter and to whom membership in his alleged school has been assigned. I will focus rather on the conclusions one can draw about Idel’s own hermeneutic. What is clear and consistent is his reluctance to accept any single idea as a way to explain a multifaceted phenomenon, even though the emphasis on diachrony bespeaks his willingness to entertain continuity and some degree of permanence of structure, which is independent of and yet always embedded within historical time.<sup>8</sup> In a second, and somewhat more polemical passage from

4 Ibid., pp. 17-18.

5 The locution “messianic idea” is derived from the first two essays in Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), pp. 1-48.

6 Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1954), pp. 329-330; idem, *Messianic Idea*, pp. 176-202. As Idel rightly points out (see following note for reference), Scholem’s views accord with the position of Buber. See Martin Buber, *The Origin and Meaning of Hasidism*, edited and translated by Maurice Friedman (New York: Horizon Press, 1960), pp. 107-112.

7 For a more extensive discussion, see Moshe Idel, *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), pp. 16-17; and idem, *Messianic Mystics*, pp. 212-213, 237-238.

8 The point is missed by Byron L. Sherwin, *Kabbalah: An Introduction to Jewish Mysticism* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2006), who appropriates Idel’s theory of models for his own attempt to provide an account of Jewish mystical teachings and practices. The method he adopts from Idel is crudely distinguished from the historical approach of Scholem: “Though keenly aware of major trends in Jewish mysticism, Idel has presented Jewish mystical teachings and experience by identifying certain phenomenologically based models of Jewish mysticism. ... The presentation of Jewish mystical ideas, experience, and practices in the present book follows Idel’s approach by focusing on models rather than by presenting Jewish mysticism primarily as an unfolding historical phenomenon in Judaism characterized by certain movements or major historical trends” (p. 26 n. 1). The relationship between history and phenomenology is more complex in Idel’s early typological categories and in his later theory of models. A more felicitous and sophisticated use of a model approach can be found in the work of Idel’s student, Jonathan Garb, “Kinds of Power: Rabbinic Texts and the Kabbalah,” *Kabbalah: Journal for the Study*

this work, Idel, proposes his “theory of models” based on “different paradigms of Kabbalistic messianism” as an alternative to the “essentialistic view” and “monolithic phenomenology” of Scholem’s approach.<sup>9</sup>

Even though Idel’s comments deal specifically with messianism, we are justified to expand beyond this particular topic and to elicit a general assertion about the nature of Jewish mysticism. As Idel writes in the introduction to *Absorbing Perfections: Kabbalah and Interpretation*, “The working hypothesis behind my approach to Jewish mysticism since the Middle Ages is that differing speculative models informed the thought, praxis, and subsequently the writings of various Kabbalists and Hasidic masters. Far from representing a unified or monochromatic line of thought that allegedly has changed throughout history, the diverse Kabbalistic sorts of literature, and to a lesser extent various Hasidic schools, have centered around at least three major models: the theosophical-theurgical one, the ecstatic one, and the talismanic one.”<sup>10</sup> For Idel, therefore, the term “model” is a heuristic device meant to accommodate the confluence of change and stability in understanding the historical evolution of Jewish mysticism but without succumbing to the mistake of other scholars whose “concern with a unified picture of the development of this lore has induced a rather monochromatic view of its phenomenology.”<sup>11</sup>

In an earlier work, *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic*, Idel expended a significant amount of space explicating his use of the term “models.” It is worth our while to explicate this analysis in some detail. In the brief section in the introduction, “Essences, History, Models,” Idel traces his approach to the philosophical phenomenology of Husserl. To be sure, the use of phenomenology, set in opposition to a strictly textological or philological-historical approach, is attested already in Idel’s first major revisionist book, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*.<sup>12</sup> Interestingly enough, however, he begins that study by noting that it “is based upon the assumption that there are two major trends in Kabbalah: the theosophical-theurgical and the ecstatic,”<sup>13</sup> a taxonomy and terminology that patently betray the influence of

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of *Jewish Mystical Texts* 6 (2001): 45-71, and in greater detail in idem, *Manifestations of Power in Jewish Mysticism: From Rabbinic Literature to Safedian Kabbalah* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2005), pp. 14-23, 47-71 (Hebrew).

9 Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, p. 33

10 Moshe Idel, *Absorbing Perfections: Kabbalah and Interpretation* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), p. 12.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 15.

12 Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), pp. 22-25.

13 *Ibid.*, p. xi. The source for the typological distinction that has dominated critical scholarship on medieval Jewish mysticism can be traced to Abulafia himself, who introduces the “two types of kabbalah” in his epistle to Judah Salomon, the Iggeret Zo’r li-Yehudah, a polemical response to the attack on him mounted by Solomon ben Abraham Ibn Adret. See Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, p. xii; Elliot R. Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia—Kabbalist and Prophet: Hermeneutics, Theosophy, and Theurgy* (Los Angeles: Cherub, 2000), pp. 94-99.

Scholem.<sup>14</sup> In the same work, Idel credits Scholem with being the “founder of the phenomenology of Kabbalah,” though he notes that many of his phenomenological (as opposed to historical) studies came later in his career and particularly when he addressed a broader audience at the annual Eranos conferences in Ascona, which were typically attended by historians of religion, scholars of comparative mysticism, and psychoanalysts.<sup>15</sup> Idel thus differentiates his own orientation from that of his predecessor: “Rather than concentrate upon the Kabbalistic schools—or trends, as Gershom Scholem designated them—and their historical sequence, I will take a phenomenological approach that will deal primarily with the major religious foci of the Kabbalah ... Instead of presenting a historical sequence of Kabbalists or of ideas, I adopt an *essentialist attitude* to the contents of Kabbalistic material that places greater emphasis upon their religious countenance than on their precise location in place and time.”<sup>16</sup> From Idel’s perspective, the phenomenological and the historical were bifurcated too sharply by Scholem. In contrast, he envisions his own method—tellingly referred to as an “essentialist attitude,” a locution that reveals a distinctive Husserlian influence, a point that Idel makes clear in a later publication—as one in which the concern with historical contextualization is subservient to the exposition of the “key concepts” of the phenomena as “atemporal modes.”<sup>17</sup>

The main approach in this book is phenomenological: my assumption is that the two main foci of Kabbalistic mysticism were the ecstatic-unitive and the theosophical-theurgical. While focusing primarily upon the descriptions of these two cores of Kabbalah, I shall also take into consideration the historical development of these two themes recurring in Kabbalistic literature. Thus, my approach uses phenomenology in order to isolate significant phenomena and only thereafter to elaborate upon the possible historical relationships between them.<sup>18</sup>

Idel delineates two main typological trends, which he applies as a grid to explore the whole of the history of kabbalah, but he nonetheless asserts adamantly that

14 The expression “major trends” is obviously derived from the lectures that served as the basis for Scholem’s influential work *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*. Moreover, describing the literary production of Abraham Abulafia and the *Zohar* (op. cit., p. 124), Scholem writes: “It is no exaggeration to say that each marks the culminating point in the development of two opposing schools of thought in Spanish Kabbalism, schools which I should like to call the ecstatic and the theosophical. ... For all their differences, the two belong together and, only if both are understood, do we obtain something like a comprehensive picture of Spanish Kabbalism.” Idel’s own scholarly essays and books have considerably sharpened the differences between these two trends and he has even challenged the accuracy of referring to Abulafia’s mysticism as a form of Spanish kabbalah. More to the point, in his typology, trends denote primarily phenomenological as opposed to historical currents. Nevertheless, there can be little question that his typological calculus is indebted to Scholem. See my review of *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* in *The Journal of Religion* 72 (1992): 137-139.

15 Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, p. 11.

16 *Ibid.*, p. xii (emphasis added).

17 *Ibid.*, p. xiii.

18 *Ibid.*, pp. xviii-xix.

his method is polyvalent. He insists, accordingly, that the juxtaposition of the historical and the phenomenological methods does not derive from a “single approach” but rather from “various approaches that may propose solutions” to the difficulties that emerge from the textual sources. Idel even refers to himself as a “pragmatist,” as he is “directed by the problems generated by the texts rather than attempting to superimpose one method upon all analyses.” Idel admits that his analysis is susceptible to a methodological “inconsistency,” but it is the price he is willing to pay in order to shun the “reductionist attitude” that characterizes a “pure” methodology. Summing up his versatile strategy of reading, Idel writes: “Phenomenology, textology, history, and psychology must in principle be used intermittently and combined in order to do justice to all the various aspects of Kabbalistic texts and ideas.”<sup>19</sup>

In the monograph on Hasidism, Idel provides a more theoretically nuanced account of his *panoramic approach*,<sup>20</sup> casting it specifically in relation to Husserl’s concept of the “invariance of sense,” which presumes that “a certain objective content transcends the contingent aspect of a phenomenon.”<sup>21</sup> In line with the Husserlian concept of essences—immutable eidetic structures that nevertheless assume varied forms in the flux of time—Idel puts forward “certain models to better understand variegated phenomena that constitute both Kabbalah and Hasidism. ... Historical approaches, with their emphasis on change, must be complemented by phenomenological ones that deal with relatively stable essences.”<sup>22</sup> Idel acknowledges that it is not easy to account for “why certain essences recur in historical and cultural circumstances that seem to invite dramatic changes in their expression,” but the one factor that seems best suited to explain this is the “interaction between different types of religious interests, models, and schools. ... Important forms of Jewish spirituality emerged not so much as the result of the confrontation between history, historical crises, or other socioeconomic circumstances with mysticism, but from syntheses between religious aspirations, personalities, ideals, nomenclatures, and fears, and various mystical models.”<sup>23</sup> The method adopted by Idel “emphasizes the existence of mystical and magical models in Jewish thought that predate Hasidism and whose interaction can explain the emergence of certain speculative developments that have been attributed by modern scholars to the impact of historical circumstances.”<sup>24</sup> The word “model,” accordingly, refers to “patterns” that are discernible in history but which cannot be explained historically. Idel refers explicitly to his approach as phenomenological,

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19 *Ibid.*, p. xix.

20 *Ibid.*, pp. 9–15.

21 Idel, *Hasidism*, p. 20.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 21.

23 *Ibid.*, pp. 21–22.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 47.

but he notes that he is not loath to embrace the concept of models, since for him these models are elicited from and not imposed upon the observable phenomena. Idel also explains that he speaks of *model* rather than *system* “because a given system of thought ... can be described ... by more than one mystical, or magical, model. From this point of view, a system is not always a systematic corpus, namely a body of writing that espouses<sup>25</sup> a logically coherent way of thought.”<sup>26</sup> The term model, moreover, is to be distinguished from structure, as the latter “may stand for a more limited concept ... and which is not a matter of imitation. ... Structures, unlike models, are modes of thought that—to paraphrase Ricoeur’s view of the symbol—invite thought but only rarely action.” Alternatively expressed, a structure is a *modus cognoscendi*, a way of knowing, whereas a model is a *modus operandi* and a *modus vivendi*, a way of acting and a way of living.<sup>27</sup> Referring to the specific example of Hasidism, Idel offers three ways to explain the ostensible restructuring of the mystical model in relation to historical circumstances. The first, which is associated with Scholem, places the emphasis on historical crises or traumas to explain the shift; the second presumes that the patterns were already in existence and the particular historical conditions of a given time bring them to the surface; the third denies the historical factors and seeks to account for the development exclusively along systemic lines. While Idel is intrigued by the third possibility, he prefers the second alternative, which “attempts to combine some parameters of the historical situation with the complexities of the history of Jewish mysticism according to the panoramic approach.”<sup>28</sup>

Let me conclude this section by noting that beyond the specific instance of Jewish mysticism, Idel extends his explanatory principle to the study of religion more globally. Thus, he begins the introduction to *Ascensions on High in Jewish Mysticism: Pillars, Lines, Ladders*, a book based on the Ioan P. Culianu lectures delivered at the Central European University in Budapest, with the recommendation that the scholar of religion adopt a “methodological eclecticism” due to the fact that no one method on its own is sufficient to deal with religion comprehensively. “All methods generate approximations based on insights, on implied psychologies, sometimes even on explicit theologies and ideologies. They assist us in understanding one or more aspects of a complex phenomenon that, in itself, cannot be explained by any single method. .. Since religion cannot be reified as an entity standing by itself, it would be wise not to subject it to analyses based on a single methodology.”<sup>29</sup> It is important to distinguish Idel’s appeal to the lack of

25 In the printed text the word is “espouses,” an obvious typographical error that I have taken the liberty to correct.

26 *Ibid.*, pp. 23-24.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 24.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 48.

29 Moshe Idel, *Ascensions on High in Jewish Mysticism: Pillars, Lines, Ladders* (Budapest and New York: Central European University Press, 2005), p. 1.

essence in the phenomenon of religion and the consequent need to study it from multiple perspectives from the view expressed famously by Jonathan Z. Smith that religion “is solely the creation of the scholar’s study” and hence it “has no existence apart from the academy,”<sup>30</sup> or, in the comparable language of Talal Asad, there can be no “universal definition of religion ... because the definition is itself the historical product of discursive processes.”<sup>31</sup> Idel does not accept this constructivist perspective, which has been affirmed by an increasing number of anthropologists and scholars of religion.<sup>32</sup> On the contrary, he accords legitimacy to religion as a distinct phenomenon that is independent of scholarly fabrication, but he resists the possibility that it may be defined by any single essence. The anthropological or psychoanalytic reductionism that would deny religion autonomy is as reductionist and substantializing to Idel as any other methodology (even the conventional phenomenology of religion) that ostensibly ascribes a discernible core to religious experience. There appears to be some form of apophatic perspectivism at work here: religion cannot be reified as an entity that stands on its own, and therefore no one mode of discourse is sufficient to discuss it, but there is no suggestion that religion should be sublated into some other disciplinary category. Be that as it may, the claim made by Idel on behalf of religion more generally conceptually parallels his particular stance with regard to Jewish mysticism: insofar as the phenomenon cannot be essentialized, no one methodological approach should be privileged as the exclusive means to ascertain it.

30 Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago, 1982), p. 11.

31 Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), p. 29.

32 For other studies that promulgate the constructivist approach, see the entries by Willie Braun and William E. Arnal in *Guide to the Study of Religion*, edited by Willie Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 3-35; Russell T. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); idem, *The Discipline of Religion: Structure, Meaning, Rhetoric* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003); Tomoko Masuzawa, *In Search of Dreamtime: The Quest for the Origin of Religion* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993); idem, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Daniel Dubuisson, *The Western Construction of Religion: Myths, Knowledge, and Ideology*, translated by William Savers (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003). To date, the one scholar of Jewish mysticism who has explicitly aligned his thinking with this orientation is Boaz Huss, “The Mystification of Kabbalah and the Myth of Jewish Mysticism,” *Pe’amim* 110 (2007): 9-29 (Hebrew). The principal agenda on the part of Huss, with which I am in accord, is to take seriously more contemporary expressions of Jewish mysticism that have been largely ignored by scholars, although this is starting to change with the appearance of more essays and monographs on the topic. See Boaz Huss, “Ask No Questions: Gershom Scholem and the Study of Contemporary Jewish Mysticism,” *Modern Judaism* 25 (2005): 141-158; idem, “All You Need Is LAV: Madonna and Postmodern Kabbalah,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 95 (2005): 611-624.

## Open System, Novel Iteration, and Polychromatic Essentialism

In the second part of this study, I will scrutinize more closely the issue of typological taxonomy and the implicit assumptions regarding the temporality of the interpretative process. I would like to raise the possibility that affirming set patterns of thought and a unified system of symbols that link together kabbalists from different historical periods does not inevitably incriminate the scholar in a methodological reductionism. Is it not feasible to conceive of traditional kabbalists<sup>33</sup> espousing an essentialism that is polychromatic, which would justify a hermeneutical method that itself embraces a polychromatism that is essentialist? Moving beyond a binary logic, which is still operative in the postmodern dichotomy (in part traceable to the legacy of Derridean deconstruction) of truth and dissimulation, I would surmise that the polysemic nature of the text that may be elicited from kabbalistic sources (from the medieval period to the present) is not dependent on the rejection of laying claim to an inherent and original intent that is recoverable through proper philological attunement. The notion of the infinity of the text engenders a proliferation of interpretations unfolding in time, an idea that, *prima facie*, would seem to accord with Derrida's idea of dissemination, the rejection of one unequivocal meaning in favor of the belief in an ongoing dispersal of meanings; the text, on this accord, changes with each new reading. But there is a critical difference: the unfolding of the text's potentially infinite meaning would not be imaginable to a kabbalist if he did not presume that all of the interpretations were enfolded in the originary text to which a discrete, albeit aporetic, signifier is assigned, that is, the ineffable name, YHWH, the name that declaims in its (non)utterance the nameless that is spoken when unspoken and unspoken when spoken. The name, then, is a transcendental signifier, a sign that points to that to which no sign can point, the essence whose essence it is to have no essence, the signifier without signified, the veil that is veiled in the veil of its own veiling. The originary text is a palimpsest from its inceptual inscripting/erasure—the multiple readings etched on its surface constitute the writing-over, the spectrality of the invisible emerging from beneath the layers of the visible, the disclosure of truth in the concealment of image through the concealment of truth in the disclosure of image. For the kabbalist exegete, the infinite, which is circumscribed in the text, is the theme that cannot be thematized, though it ceaselessly thematizes itself through

33 This taxonomy is not historically determined for me, but refers rather to kabbalists, in the past and in the present, who accept certain beliefs and practices as normative. I use this term to acknowledge that there are others who more recently have forged newer forms of spiritual expression in the name of "kabbalah." I do not exclude the latter because they are in any sense less authentic or even less traditional, but only because they are not pertinent to a critical evaluation of Idel's scholarly methodology.

concealing its concealment, disappearing in the advent of its coming-to-view, the no-showing that is the spectacle of mystical vision. Although a credible case can be made that the kabbalistic and postmodern hermeneutic share the view that there is no core intentionality to the text, the two tactics of reading differ on the question of the possibility of demarcating a “lived domain beyond all textual instances.”<sup>34</sup> Kabbalistic hermeneutics (at least in its classical formulation) rests on an ontological assumption that contemporary readers would find objectionable: there is a presence that exceeds the text, a presence, to be sure, that is always a nonpresence, present as absent, and hence it can never be represented, but it is a presence nonetheless, the secret manifest in the nonmanifestation of the secret, the nothing about which one cannot speak in contrast to there being nothing about which to speak, the unsaying of apophasis as opposed to the dissimulation of *dénégation*.<sup>35</sup> In my estimation, the medieval kabbalists (as heirs to the Neoplatonic legacy) affirmed a logic that frees itself from the traditional philosophical opposition between presence and absence, an opposition that even Derrida was not able to discard completely in his deconstructing of Western metaphysics.<sup>36</sup> The absence implied in the kabbalistic infinite would be deemed on Derridean terms to be a “negative mode of presence.”<sup>37</sup> Thinking from the standpoint of the discourse of apophasis, however, it is possible, indeed desirable, to affirm the absence of presence in the presence of absence. In the apophatic logic, there is no dichotomy, no chasm separating absence and presence that needs to be bridged; in the infinite, total absence and total presence are the same in virtue of being different, and, hence, absence is the only way for the presence to be present in the excess of lack that lacks all but the lack of excess.<sup>38</sup> To interpret the

34 I am responding to the words of Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, Translated, with an Introduction and Additional Notes, by Barbara Johnson (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 251: “The fold, then, and the blank: these will forbid us to seek a theme or an overall meaning in an imaginary, intentional, or lived domain beyond all textual instances. . . . One does not see this because one thinks one is seeing themes in the very spot where the nontheme, that which cannot become a theme, the very thing that has no meaning, is ceaselessly re-marking itself—that is, disappearing.”

35 For fuller discussion of Derrida’s notion of secrecy compared to the traditional kabbalistic view, see Elliot R. Wolfson, “Assaulting the Border: Kabbalistic Traces in the Margins of Derrida,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 70 (2002): 502-504.

36 It is of interest to recall here a comment of Derrida in an early essay “Form and Meaning: A Note on the Phenomenology of Language,” included in *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl’s Theory of Signs*, Translated, with an Introduction by David B. Allison, Preface by Newton Garver (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 107: “Phenomenology has criticized metaphysics as it is in fact only to restore it. It has informed metaphysics about its actual state of affairs in order to reawaken it to the essence of its task, to its original and authentic purpose.” It is worth pondering the extent to which these words could be applied to the deconstructive method developed by Derrida in the course of his life.

37 Derrida, *Margins*, p. 65.

38 In “Form and Meaning,” pp. 127-128 n. 14, Derrida gives an account of the trace in language that is close to the spirit of the kabbalistic apophasis, which was informed by Neoplatonic currents of thought, a point underscored by the fact that Derrida relates his own views to Plotinus: “Form (presence, evidence) would not be the final recourse, the last instance, to which every possible sign would refer . . . . In a sense—or a non-sense—that metaphysics would have excluded from its field, while nonetheless being secretly and incessantly related to it, the form would already and in itself be the trace (*ichnos*) of a certain non-presence, the vestige of the formless, announcing and recalling its other to the whole of metaphysics—as

kabbalah as if it were advocating a total collapse of divinity into the fold of the text, thereby effacing the transcendence of the beyond-being, the form of the formless, is an evocative reading, one to which I myself have occasionally succumbed,<sup>39</sup> but it does not mean that it is the most responsible either historically or philologically.<sup>40</sup>

I am in full agreement with Idel that it is imperative that the scholar eschew simplifying the rich diversity of views that have been expressed by kabbalists through the generations. It is apposite here to invoke the sagacious words of Alfred North Whitehead. After acknowledging that the “aim of science is to seek the simplest explanations of complex facts,” Whitehead warned the reader that the “guiding motto in the life of every natural philosopher should be, Seek simplicity and distrust it.”<sup>41</sup> This maxim can be applied to any individual who wants to enter the orchard of kabbalistic gnosis. The task of scientific research in this domain as well is to simplify complexity, but one should never lose sight of the complexity that has been simplified. Any monolithic presentation of kabbalah that levels out difference, whatever its practical or pedagogical utility, is plainly a distortion whose dependability must be taken with the proverbial grain of salt. On this point, there is no dispute. What I wish to pursue, however, is the question as to whether the presumption on the part of the critical scholar that kabbalists have been informed by recurrent structures and repeated symbols cannot account for the complexity in one period of time as well as across generations. Must we assume that multivocality and essentialism are mutually exclusive? Are polymorphism and monochromatism methodological paradigms that are necessarily oppositional?

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Plotinus perhaps said. The trace would not be the mixture or passage between form and the amorphous, between presence and absence ... but that which, in escaping this opposition, renders it possible because of its irreducible excess” (emphasis in original). It is noteworthy that in this earlier essay, Derrida was still willing to speak of the trace as “non-presence” or as a “vestige of the formless,” an “excess” that escapes the opposition of presence and absence. See *ibid.*, p. 156: “The trace is not a presence but is rather the simulacrum of a presence that dislocates, displaces, and refers beyond itself. The trace has, properly speaking, no place, for effacement belongs to the very structure of the trace.” And compare *idem*, *Of Grammatology*, Translated by Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 61: “The concept of arche-trace ... is in fact contradictory and not acceptable within the logic of identity. The trace is not only the disappearance of origin—within the discourse that we sustain and according to the path that we follow it means that the origin did not even disappear, that it was never constituted except reciprocally by a nonorigin, the trace, which thus becomes the origin of the origin. From then on, to wrench the concept of the trace from the classical scheme, which would derive it from a presence or from an originary nontrace and which would make of it an empirical mark, one must indeed speak of an originary trace or arche-trace. Yet we know that that concept destroys its name and that, if all begins with the trace, there is above all no originary trace.”

- 39 For instance, see Elliot R. Wolfson, “From Sealed Book to Open Text: Time, Memory, and Narrativity in Kabbalistic Hermeneutics,” in *Interpreting Judaism in a Postmodern Age*, edited by Steven Kepnes (New York: New York University Press, 1996), p. 145.
- 40 See Wolfson, “Assaulting,” pp. 505-508; and Moshe Idel, “Jacques Derrida and Kabbalistic Sources,” in *Judeities: Questions for Jacques Derrida*, edited by Bettina Bergo, Joseph Cohen, and Raphael Zagury-Orly (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), pp. 116-117. For a contrast of the kabbalistic and Derridean conceptions of the trace, see also Harold Bloom, *Kabbalah and Criticism* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), pp. 52-53.
- 41 Alfred North Whitehead, *The Concept of Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1920), p. 163.

In my judgment, this is not inexorably so, as the very discernment of multiple forms is possible only against the background of remembering what has already been visually apprehended, a point well attested in phenomenological and psychological studies of human perception, memory, and imagination. From that perspective, it seems to me entirely possible, indeed preferable, to classify aspects of kabbalistic mysticism in generic terms, since classification in this manner in no way precludes or repudiates polysemy.<sup>42</sup> In fact, it seems to me entirely appropriate to think of kabbalists from different historical periods and geographical localities as a confederation of semiotic communities, whose textual/semantic production (whether performed orally or in writing) demonstrates that heterogeneity does not inescapably rest on a presumption regarding the arbitrary nature of signification or on the relativization of linguistic discourse; diversification is not the reverse process of integration but rather a dialectical feature encompassed by it; invariably, the variable becomes apparent through the prism of the constant. Does not the very model of “models” tendered by Idel implicate one precisely in the paradox of this hermeneutic circle?

To summon Derridean language once again, it is because the truth understood by kabbalists is inherently metaphoric “that it does not escape syntax; and that it gives rise ... to a text which is not exhausted in the history of its meaning (signified concept or metaphoric tenor: thesis), in the visible or invisible presence of its theme (meaning and truth of Being). But it is also because the metaphoric does not reduce syntax, and on the contrary organizes its divisions within syntax, that it gets carried away with itself, cannot be what it is except in erasing itself, indefinitely constructing its destruction.”<sup>43</sup> The differing and deferring, which Derrida referred to by various neologisms, including *différance* and *destinerrance*, subordinate metaphysics to metaphor, privileging thereby absence over presence, but the supplemental differend—the pharmakon, the trace, or the spectral—instable and meandering as it might be, is still established by syntactic rules. The larger logical conundrum that Derrida cannot elude is the fact that for something to be discerned as indeterminate, indeterminacy itself must be determined. Expressed somewhat crudely, his crusade against essentialism is nothing short of essentialist; his sponsorship of heterogeneity is strikingly homogenous.<sup>44</sup> Derrida’s depiction of metaphor as “indefinitely constructing its destruction” points to the fundamental paradox of deconstruction as a theory of literature: what is scripted is simultaneously, and always, constructed and destructed, destructed in its ongoing

42 I am here expanding the earlier discussion in Elliot R. Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), pp. 88-94.

43 Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, Translated, with Additional Notes, by Alan Bass (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 268.

44 Christopher Johnson, *System and Writing in the Philosophy of Jacques Derrida* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 44.

construction and constructed in its abiding destruction, producing “its essence as its own disappearance, showing and hiding itself at the same time.”<sup>45</sup> This account is not far from my own approach to interpreting kabbalistic texts.<sup>46</sup>

Let us recall another crucial discussion of Derrida, as it will shed light on the larger methodological questions being addressed in this essay. Commenting on a passage from Plato’s *Laws* (803b-e) in which the “serious things” that ought to command our attention are contrasted with the “playing of games,” Derrida remarked that one can detect therein “the theological assumption of play into games, the progressive neutralization of the *singularity* of play,” which led him to conclude that “Play is always lost when it seeks salvation in games.”<sup>47</sup> The contrast of play and game relates to the fact that the latter displays rules, which by nature are subject to generalization, whereas the former is incalculably random and therefore irreducibly singular. This “dialectical confiscation”<sup>48</sup>—the “disappearance of play into games”—ensues when the particular is placed under the stamp of the universal, a move that obscures the playfulness of play:

As soon as it comes into being and into language, *play erases itself as such*.

Just as writing must erase itself as such before truth, etc. The point *is* there is no *as such* where writing or play are concerned. Having no essence, introducing difference as the conclusion for the presence of essence, opening up the possibility of the double, the copy, the imitation, the simulacrum—the game and the *graphê* are constantly disappearing as they go along. They cannot, in classical affirmation, be affirmed without being negated.<sup>49</sup>

And yet, Derrida must admit, the “(non)logic of play,” as inscription itself is governed by principles of proportionality and structurality. Derrida thus observes that at a critical moment in the *Republic* (368c-e), when theoretical discourse cannot find a way of formulating the political order, Socrates turns to the grammatical metaphor. “Structure is read as a form of writing in an instance where the intuition of sensible or intelligible presence happens to fail.”<sup>50</sup> We would not be far off the mark if we inverted this key statement: writing is to be read as a form of structure. I shall return to this matter below, but at this juncture what is crucial to underscore is that the play of writing may mark the “disruptive intrusion of otherness and nonbeing, of nonbeing as other in the unity of being,”<sup>51</sup> but the gesture of writing inevitably entails the production of something written, and the production of

45 Jacques Derrida, *Psyche: Inventions of the Other*, Volume I, Edited by Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), p. 284.

46 See especially Elliot R. Wolfson, “Suffering Eros and Textual Incarnation: A Kristevan Reading of Kabbalistic Poetics,” in *Toward a Theology of Eros: Transfiguring Passion at the Limits of Discipline*, edited by Virginia Burrus and Catherine Keller (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), pp. 341-365.

47 Derrida, *Dissemination*, pp. 157-158.

48 *Ibid.*, p. 156.

49 *Ibid.*, pp. 156-157 (emphasis in original).

50 *Ibid.*, p. 162.

51 *Ibid.*, p. 163.

something written requires rules of grammar. The incursion of writing is a cut that binds, like circumcision,<sup>52</sup> the event of singularity in which the name is enunciated, the singular event that recurs indefinitely as the gifting of time in the retreat of each moment. Ideally, the task of the writer is to bring forth something utterly unique, but this is not possible, since the words that one will use to communicate can never be unconditionally new.<sup>53</sup> Writing, therefore, imbibes the “rule of the impossible” (*la règle-impossible*),<sup>54</sup> a law that “demands the impossible ... because it is impossible, and because this very impossibility is the condition of the possibility of demand.”<sup>55</sup> That Derrida is aware of this dilemma is evident from the following comment: “The scriptural ‘metaphor’ thus crops up every time difference and relation are irreducible, every time otherness introduces determination and puts a system in circulation.”<sup>56</sup> Even more transparent is the following remark of Derrida:

A text is not a text unless it hides from the first comer, from the first glance, the law of its composition and the rules of its game. A text remains, moreover, forever imperceptible. Its law and its rules are not, however, harbored in the inaccessibility of a secret; it is simply that they can never be booked, in the present, into anything that could rigorously be called a perception. ... The dissimulation of the woven texture can in any case take centuries to undo its web: a web that envelops a web, undoing the web for centuries; reconstituting it too as an organism, indefinitely regenerating its own tissue behind the cutting trace, the decision of each reading. ... The reading and writing supplement must be rigorously prescribed, but by the necessities of a *game*, by the logic of *play*, signs to which the system of all textual powers must be accorded and attuned.<sup>57</sup>

The indeterminacy of the twofold act of writing and reading—a pairing that “designates neither undifferentiated (con)fusion nor identity at perfect rest”<sup>58</sup>—is condemned to follow a system that is determined by the “necessities of a game” and the “logic of play.” Derrida exhibits no ambiguity or ambivalence. He asserts

52 Wolfson, “Assaulting,” pp. 494-500.

53 Jacques Derrida and Maurizio Ferraris, *A Taste for the Secret*, Edited by Giacomo Donis and David Webb, Translated by Giacomo Donis (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), p. 47: “Every time I write something, I have the impression of making a beginning—but in fact that which is the same in texture is ceaselessly exposed to a singularity which is that of the other (another text, someone else, another word of the language). Everything appears anew: which means newness and repetition together. ... In the actual writing, of course, I’m well aware of the fact that at bottom it all unfolds according to the same law that commands these always different things. ... I can only hope that what I say about philosophy, literature, the event, the signature, the iterability (altering-altered repetition) is consistent with our encountering this ever renewed singularity.”

54 Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, *Jacques Derrida* (Mars: Éditions du Seuil, 1991), p. 181.

55 Jacques Derrida, *Signéponge/Signsponge*, Translated by Richard Rand (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), pp. 14-15.

56 Derrida, *Dissemination*, p. 163.

57 *Ibid.*, pp. 63-64 (emphasis in original).

58 *Ibid.*

rather emphatically: if one is not serious about this playfulness, then, one is plagued by the same foolishness as one who is too serious.<sup>59</sup>

In the last interview Derrida granted prior to his death, he conjured a familiar topos to reflect on the nature of his own career as a writer: “If I had invented my writing, I would have done so as a perpetual revolution. For it is necessary in each situation to create an appropriate mode of exposition, to invent the law of the singular event, to take into account the presumed or desired addressee; and, at the same time, to make as if this writing will determine the reader, who will learn to read (to ‘live’) something he or she was not accustomed to receiving from anywhere else.”<sup>60</sup> The goal delineated by Derrida, to keep the focus on the uniqueness of each reader, is surely laudable, but it is still reasonable to ask philosophically about the feasibility of this aspiration. What kind of law might the *law of the singular event* be? Can law ever be so radically individuated? In an essay dedicated to elucidating Kafka’s celebrated parable “Before the Law,” Derrida addressed the issue directly: “There is a singularity about relationship to the law, a law of singularity which must come into contact with the general or universal essence of the law without ever being able to do so. Now this text, this singular text ... names or relates in its way this conflict without encounter between law and singularity, this *paradox* or *enigma* of being-before-the-law.”<sup>61</sup> Given the fact that the provision of law by definition must exact some form of general applicability, for if a law were applied to only one individual, it would not fulfill the conditions of law and would simply be a matter of habit—as Derrida himself observed in one essay, “law is always a law of repetition, and repetition is always submission to law”<sup>62</sup>—the insistence on a law of singularity without any relation whatsoever to generality is absurd and incoherent. He speaks of this encounter between law and singularity as the enigma or paradox of being before-the-law, but, by his own understanding (influenced by Heidegger’s description of the human experience of death) of the possibility of the impossible,<sup>63</sup> this is an impossibility that is not even possible as impossible, an impossible possibility, the experience of which Derrida offers as a definition of deconstruction,<sup>64</sup> but it is rather an impossible impossibility that is neither possible nor impossible and therefore completely irrelevant. A writing that truly erases itself in its inscription would have to be an invisible writing, a writing

59 Ibid., p. 64: “The same foolishness, the same sterility, obtains in the ‘not serious’ as in the ‘serious.’”

60 Jacques Derrida, *Learning To Live Finally: An Interview With Jean Birnbaum*, Translated by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, With a Bibliography by Peter Krapp (Hoboken: Melville House Publishing, 2007), p. 31.

61 Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, edited by Derek Attridge (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), p. 187. For further discussion of this passage, see Elliot R. Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond: Law and Morality in Kabbalistic Mysticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 257–259.

62 Derrida, *Dissemination*, p. 123.

63 See, for instance, Jacques Derrida, *On the Name*, Edited by Thomas Dutoit, Translated by David Wood, John P. Leavey, JR., and Ian McLeod (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 44.

64 Derrida, *On the Name*, p. 43.

that left no traces because it was never written, what Derrida himself (explicating Celan's words from the poem "À la pointe acérée,"<sup>65</sup> *Ungeschriebenes, zu / Sprache verhärtet*) refers to as the "without writing, non-written, the unwritten" (*sans écrit, anécrit, non-écrit*).<sup>66</sup> To contemplate the gesture of not-writing (*pas d'écriture*)—the graphic equivalent to the phonic description of apophysis as the voiceless voice (*la voix blanche*)<sup>67</sup>—is quite different from the mandate to think about writing as an ambiguous marking of the trace. The latter may be viewed as a pre-script or as a post-script—the coming before is already a coming after having come before—an inscription of the invisible, which is not an entity that cannot be seen because it is hidden, but seeing that there is nothing to be seen but the unseeing, the white space, the blind spot, the condition for there to be any visibility at all, whereas the former is not an inscription, not a marking, nothing that leaves a trace, not even "the trace of a trace ... without presence and without absence."<sup>68</sup> As Derrida reminds us, "Trace as memory is not a pure breaching that might be reappropriated at any time as simple presence; it is rather the ungraspable and invisible difference between the breaches."<sup>69</sup> It is one thing to argue that the imperative of writing is to give space for singular events, to invent something new in every original iteration, but it is quite another thing to say that the singularity of what is to be written can have no relationship to the universal. In what language would such a text be inscribed? Derrida does entertain the possibility of an "inscription prior to writing, a proto-writing without a present origin,"<sup>70</sup> a motif that he connects to the midrashic idea of a primordial Torah inscribed as white fire upon back fire, a "text written in letters that are still invisible."<sup>71</sup> Even if we grant that the not-writing is identical with this arche-writing, a writing-before-writing, it still would be necessary to account for the translation of invisible letters into a text that can communicate to others. Does not the demand for absolute concreteness in writing elide into (or revert back to) an absolute abstraction?<sup>72</sup> In his earlier work, Derrida had it right: *otherness introduces determination and puts a system into circulation*. Indeterminacy itself is determined as indeterminate by the canons of some form of determination that has been determined to be valid relative to a particular economy of socio-political meaning. As one interpreter of Derrida astutely noted, "pure heterogeneity, pure difference, pure becoming ... cannot be apprehended

65 Poems of Paul Celan, Translated by Michael Hamburger (New York: Persea Books, 1972), pp. 196-199.

66 Jacques Derrida, *Sovereignities in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan*, edited by Thomas Dutoit and Outi Pasanen (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), p. 3.

67 Derrida, *On the Name*, p. 35.

68 Derrida, *Margins*, pp. 66-67.

69 Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, Translated, with an Introduction and Additional Notes, by Alan Bass (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 201.

70 Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, p. 146.

71 Derrida, *Dissemination*, p. 343. See Wolfson, "Assaulting," p. 478, and references to Idel cited below, n. 74.

72 Hent de Vries, "The Shabboeth Effect: On Reading Paul Celan," in *Judeities*, pp. 175-213, esp. 205-209.

as such: a degree of admixture with their theoretical counterparts (homogeneity, identity, simultaneity) is required for apprehension to become possible."<sup>73</sup>

The resistance to definite patterns and the characterization of the scholar's demarcating those patterns as dogmatically imposing a totalizing interpretation on the material is itself a judgment that reflects a homogeneous reading of heterogeneity impelled by construing the deconstructive hermeneutic in a particular way.<sup>74</sup> The contention that there is no unifying vision that would account for the rich and wide-ranging views scattered about the landscape of kabbalistic teaching, the insistence that in fact there is no such thing as kabbalah but only what various kabbalists report, the avowal that any affirmation of an inner principle amounts to assuming the existence of a metaphysical postulate of a substantialist identity that effaces difference, and the resolve to refuse any interpretive scheme that would rule out exceptions by already including those exceptions within its purview, are themselves postmodern sensibilities that are imposed on the kabbalistic texts. The kabbalists, I would argue, have been committed to precisely what is here being denied: their eclecticism is a facet of heterosemiotic uniformity, their singularity a consequence of a monological pluralism. The diversity of opinions are not indicative of "various ontological schemes" informing "different hermeneutical modes of interpretation."<sup>75</sup> On the contrary, the diversity itself is engendered by a shared ontology that informs a common hermeneutic. Is this assumption not operative in the very use of typology to provide a taxonomic grid to analyze and categorize the material? Even for Abulafia, the kabbalist whence the typological classification is derived, the assertion that there are two types of kabbalah, the sefirotic and the prophetic, must be seen as a polemical rejoinder to the attack on him by Solomon ben Abraham Ibn Adret.<sup>76</sup> While there are incontestable discrepancies between Abulafia and the so-called theosophic kabbalists, the former repeatedly transgresses his own taxonomy by affirming principles that were common to all kabbalists of his day, for instance, the identification of the Torah and the Tetragrammaton, the assumption that Hebrew is the matrix language of being, and the insistence that if one separates one of the ten sefirot, it is as if one were to create a division in the divine. Leaving aside the larger historiographic issue, the critical question is: can one both adhere to

73 Johnson, *System and Writing*, p. 19.

74 Here it is important to recall that Idel notes some basic affinities (while also demarcating important differences) between the "semantic radicalism" exemplified in the kabbalah of Abulafia and the radical hermeneutics in Derridean deconstruction. See Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, pp. 416-423. Idel has engaged Derrida and kabbalah in other studies as well. See Moshe Idel, "Infinities of Torah in Kabbalah," in *Midrash and Literature*, edited by Geoffrey H. Hartman and Sanford Budick (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986), pp. 149-150; idem, "White Letters: From R. Levi Isaac of Berditchev's Views to Postmodern Hermeneutics," *Modern Judaism* 26 (2006): 169-192, esp. 182-187; idem, "Jacques Derrida and Kabbalistic Sources," pp. 111-130. For my own interventions in this matter, see Wolfson, "Assaulting," pp. 475-514.

75 Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah and Eros* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 129.

76 See reference to my study on Abulafia cited above, n. 13.

the presence of typological models and aver that it is essentialist to presume replication of structure?

Let me turn now to the topic of gender construction, which will help put into sharper relief the points of convergence and divergence between the two interpretive paths that emerge from a common root. In *Kabbalah and Eros*, Idel is highly critical of the conclusion I have reached, taking issue with my opinion that traditional kabbalists have uniformly privileged the masculine, viewing the female as ontologically derivative from the male. I am accused of assuming (following the lead of Isaiah Tishby) that kabbalists operated with a “pansymbolic approach ... based on a common psychic structure.”<sup>77</sup> Idel is skeptical of such an approach, as it supposedly promotes a metaphysics (or ontology) that is “homogenous” and a psychology that is “collective.” Championing diversity and heterogeneity, Idel contends that kabbalistic writings, even from the same historical period, “may display a metaphysical complexity emerging from the accumulation of earlier and divergent stands, exposed in different forms of organization of knowledge, and functioning together.”<sup>78</sup> Ostensibly ignoring this diversity, I have concocted a “unified kabbalistic metaphysics which is phallogocentric,” a “monistic” approach that glorifies “androcentric exclusivity.”<sup>79</sup> Even worse my approach “reduces medieval cultural worlds to modern or postmodern theories, and it may transform scholarship into an exercise in projecting the modern into the medieval; in short, this approach is prone to become an anachronistic game.”<sup>80</sup> Reiterating the point at the summary of a more sustained, though by his own admission not a comprehensive, criticism of my theory of gender construction and the metamorphosis implied thereby, Idel writes:

In my opinion, any attempt to articulate a comprehensive system that operates upon premises which reflect modern gender studies may constitute an anachronistic projection if there is no specific assessment of the gendered underpinning of the system itself. Assumptions concerning the esoteric nature of the underlying gender theories may reflect more a modern psychoanalytical approach than a disclosure of a hidden dimension of medieval mystical texts. We should not reduce life in the Middle Ages to some simplistic clichés reflecting a conservative attitude; neither should we read those texts as adumbrating the details of the modern theories of gender.<sup>81</sup>

I will refrain from responding to the allegation that I have offered “simplistic clichés” based on contemporary psychoanalytic and gender theories instead of providing a “specific assessment of the gendered underpinning of the system

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77 Idel, *Kabbalah and Eros*, p. 100.

78 Ibid.

79 Ibid., pp. 100-101.

80 Ibid., p. 101.

81 Ibid., pp. 130-131.

itself." Needless to say, I beg to differ, but my concern here is to address two other issues at the heart of Idel's critique, the issue of generalization and that of anachronism, insofar as these are more pertinent to the main concern of this essay, the hermeneutical presuppositions related to the question of continuity and discontinuity in the study of kabbalistic lore.

I have already noted Idel's charge that I am guilty of adopting a pansymbolic approach, ignoring the diversity of the sources. Idel even takes issue with my referring to the "zoharic kabbalah" or the "zoharic authorship," since these terms suggest that I may have conflated "the basic differences between the various layers of the Zohar."<sup>82</sup> Idel is implicitly invoking here the research of Yehuda Liebes, who has argued for multiple authors of the zoharic text.<sup>83</sup> Liebes is mentioned explicitly in a second passage as the basis for the assumption that "theosophical diversity is recognized as a hallmark of Zoharic thought."<sup>84</sup> The positing of multiple strata in the zoharic text should sensitize the scholar to the fact that "even within the same theosophical system, we must be aware of the existence of genealogically and phenomenologically different forms of narrative, which have different forms of inner logic, different histories, and different patterns of literary treatment, and which therefore should not be merged in a harmonistic or homogeneous explanation." My approach, by contrast, is based on a "totalizing reading" of "different theosophical narratives as if they are part of one unified pattern."<sup>85</sup> I readily admit that I have assumed a unified pattern for the zoharic literature. But this supposition does not equal a rejection of the hypothesis proffered by Liebes. One can posit several authors of a treatise and continue to speak on hermeneutical grounds of a unifying factor that allows for difference; the weave of the textual fabric does not disrupt the possibility of iteration that renews itself indefinitely. Scholars of Zohar can benefit from the wisdom and experience of biblicists who do not deny the form-critical approach but who nevertheless discern repeating thought-patterns.<sup>86</sup>

I would propose that plurivocality and fragmentariness need to be kept distinct. Too often, it seems, they are confused, and one assumes that the former automatically implies the latter. To argue for a plurality of voices, however, does not necessarily mean that all we have are fragments. The overarching sense of the whole may, in fact, reverberate only through a polyphony of voices. In the

82 Ibid., p. 129.

83 It should be pointed out that the conjecture of Liebes regarding a circle of kabbalists responsible for the composition of the text is an argument that has not been confirmed conclusively nor is it accepted by every scholar. I myself am partial to this approach (see, for instance, the reference below at n. 87), a point that Idel does not concede, but I would nevertheless challenge his presentation of the hypothesis as if it were proven beyond any doubt.

84 Idel, *Kabbalah and Eros*, p. 100.

85 Ibid., pp. 129-130.

86 I have here offered a condensed version of my argument in *Language, Eros, Being*, p. 48, which anticipated Idel's critique.

case of the zoharic text, it is possible, in my opinion, to apply a “holistic analysis,”<sup>87</sup> even if we entertain the possibility of multiple layers at the compositional level. The poststructuralist approach that I have adopted both allows for these different strata and maintains that there is an overall system that engenders the particulars. The tendency to generalize, therefore, should not be misconstrued as viewing the variegated history of Jewish mystical doctrines and practices monolithically. The belief that it is justifiable to speak in general terms does not come at the expense of ignoring specific details and historical contingencies. On the contrary, the generic claims are rooted in and must be tested against textual particularities. I do think, however, that it is plausible, indeed mandatory, to speak of kabbalistic lore in terms of structures of thought that persist through time. Repetition of these structures does not presuppose an ontological condition of presence that suppresses difference in the name of sameness. The history of kabbalism as a religious phenomenon illustrates that it is precisely the presumed immutability of system that occasions novel interpretation. In the wisdom of the tradition, if a teaching is old, it is because it is new, but it is new because it is old. The simultaneity of truth as novel and erstwhile is a fundamental axiom of interpretation—linked to the conception of time in its most rudimentary form as an instant of diremptive reiteration, the repetition of the same as different in the renewal of the different as same—legitimated not by reason but by prophetic experience that confirms in cultural memory the presumed unbroken chain of the oral tradition.<sup>88</sup> System, consequently, is precisely what accounts for interruption of order by chaos, the intervention of the moment that renders the flow of time continuously discontinuous and discontinuously continuous. The recognition of multiplicity does not negate unity if we understand the latter as a system that comprises multiple subsystems, an economy of meaning that incorporates manifold economies.

The notion of system that I am affirming is indebted to the thinking of Franz Rosenzweig expressed especially in a letter to Rudolf Ehrenburg (dated 12 December 1917).<sup>89</sup> According to Rosenzweig, system does not denote an

87 I appropriate this expression from Seth D. Kumin, *The Logic of Incest: A Structuralist Analysis of Hebrew Mythology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), p. 278. The full text is cited in *Language, Eros, Being*, p. 48.

88 Elliot R. Wolfson, *Alef, Mem, Tau: Kabbalistic Musings on Time, Truth, and Death* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), pp. 64–65.

89 Franz Rosenzweig, *Briefe*, selected and edited by Edith Rosenzweig (Berlin: Schocken Verlag, 1935), p. 263 (emphasis in original). An English translation is found in Franz Rosenzweig, *Philosophical and Theological Writings*, Translated and Edited, with Notes and Commentary, by Paul W. Franks and Michael L. Morgan (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2000), pp. 51–52 n. 11. On Rosenzweig’s notion of system, see Stéphane Mosès, *System and Revelation: The Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig*, Foreword by Emmanuel Levinas, Translated by Catherine Tihanyi (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1992), pp. 36–45; and the extensive analysis in Benjamin Pollock, “Knowing the All’: Franz Rosenzweig’s System of Philosophy,” Ph.D. thesis, Hebrew University, 2006. I thank the author for sending me a revised version of the dissertation, *Franz Rosenzweig and the Systematic Task of Philosophy*. A useful collection of essays that

architectural structure that is formed by assembling individual stones whose meaning is determined only by the sense of the whole, but rather it bespeaks a striving on the part of all individual entities qua individual for relationship and interconnectivity; the viability of system is related to affirming a unity perpetually in the making, a sense of the whole that is not order but chaos, a totality that must always lie “beyond a conscious horizon.” Rosenzweig notes that, in the Hegelian system, each individual position is anchored only in the whole and is thus related exclusively to two others, the one that immediately precedes it and the one that immediately succeeds it. In the system affirmed by Rosenzweig, the genuine novelty of each temporal moment is not determined by its occupying a median position in a linear sequence between what came before and what comes after. On the contrary, to the extent that the moment is authentically novel, it is experienced as the constant resumption of what is always yet to be, the return of what has never been, the vertical intervention that opens the horizontal time-line to the spherical fullness of eternity.<sup>90</sup>

In the 1925 essay “Das neue Denken,” in which Rosenzweig offers the reader a guide to reading his theopoetic masterpiece, *Der Stern der Erlösung*, he remarked that the latter is not a “Jewish book” or a “philosophy of religion,” but it is a “system of philosophy,” which sought “to bring about the total renewal of thinking.”<sup>91</sup> The system propounded by Rosenzweig is situated in the interstice between philosophy and theology,<sup>92</sup> but it emerges from the “intuitive knowledge of

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provides something of the historical and ideational background for Rosenzweig is found in *System and Context: Early Romantic and Early Idealistic Constellations*, edited by Rolf Ahlers (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2004), and see Paul Franks, *All or Nothing: Systematicity, Transcendental Arguments, and Skepticism in German Idealism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

90 Wolfson, *Alef, Mem, Tau*, pp. 50-52. See also Karl Lowith, “F. Rosenzweig and M. Heidegger on Temporality and Eternity,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 3 (1942): 53-77; Mosès, *System and Revelation*, pp.150-173, and Peter E. Gordon, *Rosenzweig and Heidegger: Between Judaism and German Philosophy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), pp. 185-205.

91 Rosenzweig, “The New Thinking,” p. 110. For the original German, I have consulted Franz Rosenzweig, *Kleinere Schriften* (Berlin: Schocken Verlag, 1937), pp. 373-398. According to his own account (“The New Thinking,” pp. 111-112), the system in the Star comprises three of the four elements usually found in a philosophical system, logic, ethics, and aesthetics, the only element missing is a philosophy of religion. Towards the end of the essay (p. 131), Rosenzweig does accept the designation of the Star as a “Jewish book.” He explains, however, that this does not imply that it deals with “Jewish things,” but that the “old Jewish words” are deployed to express what it has to say. “Like things in general, Jewish things have always passed away; yet Jewish words, even when old, share the eternal youth of the word, and if the world is opened up to them, they will renew the world.”

92 Rosenzweig, “The New Thinking,” p. 129, and compare the description of the “new philosopher” in Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, translation by Barbara E. Galli (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), p. 116: “Philosophy today requires ... that ‘theologians’ do philosophy. But theologians in a different sense, of course. For ... the theologian whom philosophy requires for the sake of its scientific character is himself a theologian who desires philosophy - out of concern for integrity. What was a demand in the interests of objectivity for philosophy will turn out to be a demand in the interests of subjectivity for theology. They complete each other, and together they bring about a new type of philosopher or theologian, situated between theology and philosophy.”

experience" (*anschaulichen Wissen der Erfahrung*) of God, human, and world,<sup>93</sup> which serves as the epistemic basis for the vision to come of the All, a seeing of the eternal star in the countenance of the configuration that is truth.<sup>94</sup> An allusion to this vision, whence the path goes forth and to which it returns, can be found in another passage in "Das neue Denken." Reflecting on the nature of the philosophic book, of which the *Star* is exemplary, Rosenzweig notes that "the whole (*Ganze*) becomes surveyable at a glance (*Blick*)."<sup>95</sup> This momentary glimpse of the whole in the new thinking is to be contrasted with the conception of totality in the old thinking, insofar as the time of its occurrence "cannot be predicted" and it is not "at exactly the same point for two readers."<sup>95</sup> It is nevertheless an integral part of the system that Rosenzweig constructed from his own vision, a "beholding the 'world-likeness in the countenance of God' (*Weltgleichnisses im Gottesantlitz*)," a "seizing of all being in the immediacy of a moment (*eines Augenblicks*) and blink of an eye (*Augen-blicks*)" in which "the limit of humanity is entered."<sup>96</sup> The broken All is reconfigured in this immediate sight of the whole, the whole that, like the moment in which it is seen, the blink of the eye, is the not yet that has already been and therefore is always still to come.

At the heart of Rosenzweig's conception of systematicity is his view that understanding occurs always in the present, "time in the most temporal sense" (*Zeit im zeitlichsten Sinn*).<sup>97</sup> This insight runs parallel to Rosenzweig's account of revelation in the *Star* based on the premise that "God's love is always wholly in the moment."<sup>98</sup> The knot of divine love takes an infinity of time to unravel, but at the center of that love is the utterance of the divine commandment that "knows only the moment: it waits for the outcome right within the moment of its growing audible. ... The commandment is thus—pure present (*reine Gegenwart*). ... Revelation is in the present (*gegenwärtig*), and indeed it is the present par excellence ... the presently lived experience."<sup>99</sup> Revelation, therefore, is an experience (*Erlebnis*) that imbibes the paradox of being "always new only because it is immemorially old" (*Die Offenbarung ist also allzeit neu, nur weil sie uralte ist*).<sup>100</sup> The eruption of the revelatory event (*Ereignis*) must "begin

93 Rosenzweig, "The New Thinking," p. 118 (*Kleinere Schriften*, p. 380).

94 Rosenzweig, *Star*, p. 441. For a more elaborate discussion of this vision, see Elliot R. Wolfson, "Facing the Effaced: Mystical Eschatology and the Idealistic Orientation in the Thought of Franz Rosenzweig," *Journal for the History of Modern Theology* 4 (1997): 39-81, esp. 74-80. I have reexamined the topic from a different perspective in a hitherto unpublished essay, "Light Does Not Talk But Shines: Apophasis and Vision in Rosenzweig's Theopoetic Temporality." My analysis here is, in part, drawn from that study, which I hope to publish one day.

95 Rosenzweig, "The New Thinking," p. 114 (*Kleinere Schriften*, p. 377).

96 *Ibid.*, p. 136 (*Kleinere Schriften*, p. 397).

97 Rosenzweig, "The New Thinking," p. 131 (*Kleinere Schriften*, p. 391).

98 Rosenzweig, *Star*, p. 177.

99 *Ibid.*, pp. 191, 200. Reference to the German is based on *Der Stern der Erlösung* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1990), pp. 197, 207.

100 *Ibid.*, p. 121 (*Der Stern*, p. 123).

already at the same moment, in the sinking away it must already begin again; its perishing must be at the same time a beginning again. ... So this moment must have more as its content than the mere moment. The moment shows something always new to the eye every time it opens."<sup>101</sup> This moment, which has the potentiality to be perpetually renewed, and thus it carries within itself the "diversity of the old and new," is identified by Rosenzweig as an "hour" or the "fixed moment" in which "its end can flow again into its beginning because it has a middle, or rather many moments of the middle between its beginning and its end. With beginning, middle and end, it can become what the mere sequence of single ever new moments can never become: a circle that flows back in itself. ... In the hour, the moment is therefore turned into that which, when it should have perished, always newly begins again and thus into the imperishable, the *nunc stans*, eternity."<sup>102</sup> Compressed in the "single moment" is "pure temporality" (*reinen Zeitlichkeit*)—significantly, this is demarcated as the "purely temporally lived life of Goethe"—whereby "life has become entirely temporal, or, put differently, time has an entirely living, an entirely real river flowing through the vast space above the crags of the moment; no sooner can eternity fall upon time. Life, and all life, must be entirely living (*ganz lebendig*) before it can become eternal life (*ewiges Leben*)."<sup>103</sup> In the moment, the blink-of-the-eye, time is fully temporal, and hence eternal, a time beyond the calibration of ordinary time, but a time nonetheless, indeed the fullness of time.

The conception of time underlying my own hermeneutic is in accord with Rosenzweig's perspective according to which the old and the new are dialectically intertwined. To assume, as I do, that structures of thought may be recovered philologically, structures influenced but not causally determined by historical factors, does not subject kabbalistic texts to a standard of rigid homogeneity that ignores the specificity and inimitability of actual texts. Structure accounts for heterogeneity, system for unpredictability; it is precisely by seeing the recurring pattern that the changes become most visible. The perspective that I have culled from Rosenzweig may be compared profitably to the thinking of Derrida.<sup>104</sup> Let us recall the aforementioned insight of his regarding the inevitability of otherness putting a system into circulation. What can we make of this juxtaposition, the ideal of system and the movement of circulation? The department of the former will be discerned

101 *Ibid.*, p. 307.

102 *Ibid.*, p. 308.

103 *Ibid.*, p. 306 (*Der Stern*, p. 320).

104 Several attempts have been made to place Derrida and Rosenzweig in conversation. See Robert Gibbs, *Correlations in Rosenzweig and Levinas* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 95-97; Yudit Kornberg Greenberg, *Better Than Wine: Love, Poetry, and Prayer in the Thought of Franz Rosenzweig*, Foreword by Elliot R. Wolfson (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996), pp. 86-88; Gérard Bensussan, "The Last, The Remnant ... (Derrida and Rosenzweig)," in *Judeities*, pp. 36-51; Zachary Braiterman, *The Shape of Revelation: Aesthetics and Modern Jewish Thought* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), pp. 118-119, 161.

from the manner of the latter. To circulate is to venture toward an exit that is a return, a turning-around, a recycling, not, however, as a closed circle whose beginning is fixed in its end and its end in its beginning. On the contrary, the return that comes by way of exit is an open circle that brings one back to where one has always been as never having been before, a place strangely familiar, not an exit to return nor a return to exit, but a return that is an exit, an exit that is a return.<sup>105</sup> "Circulation will always be circulation of the truth: toward the truth. Cause and effect of the circle, *causa sui*, proper course and destiny of the letter."<sup>106</sup> In this circulation, cause and effect are interchangeable, and everything occurs together, "at the same time," which is, ontically speaking, no time, an insight that Derrida flags as the absurdity "that constitutes the *aporia* as *aporia*."<sup>107</sup> Distinguishing the views of Husserl and Levinas, Derrida wrote: "A system is neither finite nor infinite. A structural totality escapes this alternative in its functioning. It escapes the archaeological and the eschatological, and inscribes them in itself."<sup>108</sup> The meaningfulness of the system is not determined by reference to an ultimate beginning or to an ultimate end. There is no beginning and there is no end. The creative process is such that one imagines that one is always starting anew, but what appears as new is, in truth, a mix of newness and repetition, each event is a renewed singularity.<sup>109</sup>

Kabbalah, I submit, is a cultural-literary phenomenon that illustrates a system of this sort, a structural totality for which beginning cannot be remembered nor end anticipated. It is conceivable to imagine the contours of this system as a totality without presuming a fixed terminus at the start or at the finish. In the open system, where the whole always was and is in the making, and hence can never be subject to being broken, since brokenness is part of its very constitution, the only time that is real is the time of the present. In the hermeneutical praxis, accordingly, originality and repetition are not mutually exclusive, but well forth from the spot where the novel is recurrently ancient and the ancient interminably novel. As Gilles Deleuze put it:

We produce something new only on condition that we repeat - once in the mode which constitutes the past, and once more in the present of metamorphosis. Moreover, what is produced, the absolutely new itself, is in turn nothing but repetition: the third repetition, this time by excess, the repetition of the future as eternal return. ... The order of time has broken the circle of the Same and arranged time in a series only in order to re-form, a circle

105 Gordon, *Rosenzweig and Heidegger*, pp. 174-182, discusses the circular structure of Rosenzweig's *Star* in comparison to Heidegger's phenomenological account of the circularity of life-experience. A more detailed comparison of Rosenzweig and Derrida on this topic is surely warranted.

106 Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, Translated, with an Introduction and Additional Notes, by Alan Bass (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 462 n. 34.

107 Derrida, *Margins*, p. 56.

108 Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 123. For a detail analysis of this theme, see Johnson, *System and Writing*.

109 See reference above, n. 53.

of the Other at the end of the series. ... The form of time is there only for the revelation of the formless in the eternal return. ... In this manner, the ground has been superseded by a groundlessness, a universal ungrounding which turns upon itself and causes only the yet-to-come to return.<sup>110</sup>

The merging of novelty and repetition in the Deleuzian interpretation of Nietzsche's doctrine of eternal recurrence well suits both the kabbalistic material and the appropriate scholarly apparatus to study it. The production of something new—equally for the kabbalist and for the scholar of kabbalah—comes about through the mechanism of repeating that proceeds from the formlessness of time's form; indeed, the absolutely new is nothing but repetition, albeit the repetition of what is yet-to-come. Following the logic of this temporal comportment, we come to the conclusion that the distinction between conservative and innovative orientations, at least if treated in a binary fashion, is not a faithful translation of the complex hermeneutical interplay that characterizes the creativity of the kabbalist.<sup>111</sup> On the face of it, some kabbalists may have preferred the rhetoric of conservatism to the rhetoric of innovation, but in the last analysis, one as the other would have maintained that the expansion of the tradition is itself part of the perpetuation of the tradition, just as the perpetuation of the tradition is part of its expansion. Kabbalists singled out as most representative of the conservative orientation, for example, Nahmanides, conceal the innovativeness of their thinking in the guise of a received wisdom, whereas kabbalists singled out as most representative of the innovative orientation, for example, Abraham Abulafia and Moses de León, repeatedly affirm the antiquity of the ideas they transmit.

Operating with this diremptive conception of time, the charge of anachronism itself becomes anachronistic. As the contemporary philosopher David Wood observed: "The recognition of multiplicity amidst apparent unity illustrates the importance of models in guiding interpretation but does not tell us anything specific about time."<sup>112</sup> The matter of time is to be determined independently of the models we elicit from or inflict upon our sources—I do not think this distinction is very useful, as the circularity of the hermeneutic experience dictates that eisegesis and exegesis cannot be separated categorically. With this alternate conception of temporality in mind, one can argue credibly for the use of current theories to explicate older structures that provide the parameters within which the discontinuous continuity of the kabbalah continues to evolve. The contribution of scholars, especially when dissenting opinions are respectfully expressed, is an integral part of the process.

110 Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, translated by Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), pp. 90-91.

111 For instance, see Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, pp. 212-213, 216-217.

112 David Wood, *Time After Time* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2007), p. 15.

**MICHAEL ZANK**

## How Does One Become a Jewish Philosopher? Reflections on a Canonical Status<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:**

Many recent journal articles and monographs by students of Jewish philosophy have been dedicated to the question of definition: what is Jewish philosophy, and how can it be distinguished from its others, such as Jewish thought, non-philosophical Judaism, and non-Jewish philosophy, philosophical theory of religion, etc. In this essay, I take a somewhat playful alternative approach by asking about philosophers rather than philosophies. The first parts compares the status of philosophers in different cultures. In comparison with the high regard for philosophy and philosophers, philosophers were not regarded highly by the Jews, at least not since the rabbinic tradition made Hellenism appear contemptible. Conversely, Hellenizing Greeks and Jews considered Judaism not just compatible with the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle but itself a philosophy and regarded the Jews as a “race of philosophers” (Theophrastus). The canon of Jewish philosophers wavers between none and all, depending on who establishes such a canon. In the final section, I follow the intuitions of Gillian Rose, whose death-bed conversion may, to some, put her beyond the pale of Jewish philosophers and who contributes a useful mode of decanonization to the discussion of who is a Jewish philosopher.

To the hurried reader of the title of this paper:

The hurried reader of the title of this paper may expect me to provide academic job counselling or, worse, to reflect on the unlikely attainment of someone like myself to the canonical status of a Jewish philosopher. My intention is neither to provide career advice, nor to speak about myself. Rather, as the subtitle indicates, I approach the main question of Jewish philosophy (namely, whether there is a thing that goes by this name) by reflecting on the criteria historiographers and

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1 This paper was originally written for and delivered to the Institute for Philosophy and Religion at Boston University in its 2007-08 series on “The Future of the Philosophy of Religion.”

lexicographers of Jewish philosophy advance or presuppose when they decide whom to include in their canon of Jewish philosophers. Students of the history of Jewish philosophy must have recourse to a rule of inclusion and exclusion unless they despair of a definition. Shirking the problem of an essence or substance of Jewish philosophy, the purpose of my reflections is to shed some indirect light on this question by looking at attempts at establishing canons of Jewish philosophers.<sup>2</sup>

I begin with a few sociological observations on the status of philosophy and philosophers in different societies. These observations, while unscientific and purely anecdotal, nevertheless highlight the fact that the value of a professional guild, including the philosophical profession, is always relative. Setting up modern French, German, and American societies as my control groups, I briefly review the history of philosophical writing among the Jews. I then turn to recent attempts at comprehensive accounts of Jewish philosophy and the canonical reasoning that must have gone into their making. I conclude with reflections on problems entailed in defining the canon of Jewish philosophers.

## 1. On the status of philosophy and philosophers among Jews and others

Unlike the French and the Germans, Americans and Jews tend not to hold philosophers in the highest esteem.

In France, philosophers maintain the intellectual tradition of rationalism on which the republic was founded in 1789. Philosophy is here part of good citizenship and a protection against the ever-present threat of religion to the laïcistic state. In this sense, the philosophers, notwithstanding the disagreements among them, are part of the political system, and their debates, no matter how acrimonious, testify to the vitality of public life in France.

In Germany, philosophers provide relief from the tedium of politics, and their public intellectual musings are an antidote to the erosion of interest in political participation, or what the Germans call *Politikverdrossenheit*. To be sure, the reading public is a small elite but, at least in their own mind, an elite that regards itself as guardians of an essentially patriarchal society where philosophers provide the decisive interpretation of all cultural phenomena, from history and politics to the arts and the internet. Where in France to philosophize is to

<sup>2</sup> I take a more direct approach to the definition of Jewish philosophy in "Zwischen den Stühlen. On the Taxonomic Anxieties of Modern Jewish Philosophy" in *European Journal of Jewish Studies*, Volume 1, Number 1, 2007, pp. 105-134.

participate in political debate, in Germany to philosophize is to interpret history and culture, a pursuit without which, to be sure, society would fail to understand whence it comes and whither it is going. In an image, in France philosophy is the songbird of the morning, whereas in Germany it is still the owl taking flight at dusk.

While certainly hospitable to philosophers, neither the French, nor the Germans have been politically the wiser or economically the more successful for their love of philosophy. More importantly, what renders their love of philosophy of doubtful value is the trust they put in intellectuals instead of in the judgment of ordinary citizens. The respect for philosophy and philosophers has provided a stage for public intellectualism that seems unmerited by what philosophers are able to do for the public. The expectation that philosophers ought to be able to provide wisdom in a world in which it is folly that mostly prevails has served to seduce entire communities of educated people to subscribe to the ideologies that repeatedly drew the European masses into their orbit and their states into ruin. Philosophers, academics, and intellectuals have not just been part of the solution, but part of the problem. It may suffice to name the greatest 20th century philosopher to illustrate this point, namely, Martin Heidegger.

In contrast to the French and the Germans, Americans trust a scientist before they trust a philosopher. They are in fact much less likely to mistake one for the other because they use different words when they refer to their respective pursuits. In German, one speaks of *philosophische Wissenschaft* or of *Philosophie als Wissenschaft*, just as in French one speaks of *sciences morales*. Literally translated into English these expressions amount to mere puzzles, and the corresponding idiomatic terms do without reference to the word “science,” as if to distinguish what the German and French taxonomies tend to conflate. The English language separates science, or rigorous knowledge of the causal nexus between natural phenomena, from the disciplines of philosophical study and ethics. Americans, esp. college students, are extremely confident that anything philosophically worthwhile can be understood without requiring the acquisition of a foreign language and they are likely to give up on philosophical literature that fails to satisfy the conditions of simplicity and accessibility. After all, the great philosophical themes of the true, the good, and the beautiful are the common property of all members of society and therefore accessible to all. It violates the democratic instinct that is so ingrained in the American mind when philosophers go beyond ordinary language to discuss what everyone should be able to comprehend. At most, philosophers are suffered to become precise and therefore pedantic in their mode of expression, but a philosophy that uses any sort of specialized jargon appears as a kind of Jesuitry, a surreptitious way of returning us to the slavery of dogmatism. Unless it can make itself

clear to everyone, philosophy seems merely another pious fraud and a way of reestablishing the priesthood of the few over the many.

Notwithstanding these differences, one can meaningfully and without much ado refer to French philosophers, German philosophers, and, yes, American philosophers. We can even refer to French, German, and American philosophies. Is Jewish philosophy on a par with these types of philosophies? How does it compare? And should "Jewish" not rather be matched with something like "Christian" and "Islamic" rather than with "American," "French," or "German," in other words, am I not altogether barking up the wrong tree? In order to get a preliminary and merely quantitative impression as to how to compare Jewish philosophy with other philosophies, I undertook a websearch.

Websearch "American, French, German, and Jewish philosophies" conducted Tuesday Oct. 9, 2007, ca. 12:00pm EST:

www.google.com

74,500,000 for american philosophy.

54,400,000 for french philosophy.

23,400,000 for german philosophy.

2,530,000 for Jewish philosophy.

www.google.de:

2.160.000 für deutsche philosophie.

2.020.000 für französische Philosophie.

1.020.000 für amerikanische Philosophie.

588.000 für jüdische Philosophie.

www.google.fr:

2 300 000 pour philosophie francaise.

2 190 000 pour philosophie allemande.

1 950 000 pour philosophie americaine.

956 000 pour philosophie juive.

Search for Jewish, Christian, and Islamic philosophies

www.google.fr:

2 100 000 pour philosophie islamique.

1 280 000 pour philosophie chretienne.

956 000 pour philosophie juive.

www.google.de:

2.060.000 für islamische philosophie.

823.000 für christliche philosophie.

588.000 für jüdische Philosophie.

www.google.com:

12,700,000 for christian philosophy.

2,530,000 for Jewish philosophy.

2,230,000 for islamic philosophy.

With the exception of the Northamerican search (google.com), where Jewish philosophy is slightly more frequently found than Islamic philosophy, Jewish philosophy is usually the term with the least “hits.” Although it comes out last, it is hardly an infrequently mentioned term. What we can learn from this instant algorithmic canon of search engine “hits” is that Jewish philosophy, whether considered in comparison with the philosophies of nations or whether considered in comparison with the philosophies of communities of faith, is actually its considerable popularity among internet users. Of the world’s population, there are currently approximately 2.5 billion Christians, followed by approximately 1.5 billion Muslims. In comparison, there only about 14 million Jews. The considerable popularity of Jewish philosophy among internet users in the Western hemisphere indicates either that Jews are particularly active internet users and interested in Jewish philosophy or, more likely, that Jewish philosophy is widely popular, especially among Christians, especially in France and Germany.

Generally speaking, it is probably safe to say that Jews have not been enamored with philosophy or philosophers. In the canon of Judaic studies, Jewish philosophy is a marginal subject, eclipsed by historical-philological and sociological disciplines. Sometimes and in some places the academic study of Jewish philosophy is even considered an indicator of an attenuation of Judaism rather than a sign of the strength of the tradition. In such cases, it is taken as a sign of alienation, of a loss of authenticity, a selling out to the Gentiles, or, at best, of apologetic value. It reeks of Jewish disloyalty or religious unbelief, rather than of an affirmation of Jewish vitality, or it is feared to carry alien fire before the altar of Torah. To my knowledge, there are currently only two “departments” of Jewish philosophy, namely, at Yeshivah University in New York (an institution whose commitment to orthodoxy is not in doubt) and at Tel Aviv University in Israel (an institution whose heterodoxy is not in doubt). Elsewhere, e.g., at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem or at Ben Gurion University in Beer Sheva, the corresponding unit refers to its subject matter as the “thought of Israel” (*mahshevet yisrael*) and usually translates as “Department of Jewish Thought.”

It is not just in neoconservative Zionist circles that Jewish philosophy is held in low esteem.<sup>3</sup> With less pathos and more of a skeptical note, the Yiddish word *filosof* refers to someone who engages in futile speculation instead of *tacheles*, the concrete and real. In modern Hebrew, perhaps because of an enduring German Jewish influence on Israeli cultural and educational institutions, the person engaging in futile speculation is no longer known as a *filosof* but as an *astronaut*.

With this I turn to history.

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3 The most powerful intellectual voice among Zionist neocons today is Yoram Hazoni who, in a book on the “struggle for Israel’s soul,” identifies Martin Buber and other influential liberal intellectuals as having exerted a damaging influence on the Jewish state, one that must be countered by an equally powerful intellectual movement that Hazoni is trying to spearhead today. See Hazoni, *The Jewish State: The Struggle for Israel’s Soul*, New York: Basic Books, 2001.

## 2. On the origins of Jewish philosophy and the history of Jewish philosophical writing

The ill repute of philosophy among the Jews dates back to the talmudic rabbis who refer to it as *hokhmat yavvan*, the wisdom of Greece. Thus identified as an “alien wisdom” (Momigliano), Greek philosophy is excreted, so to say, from the range of permissible subjects of the rabbinic curriculum. Moreover, the rabbis condemn Jewish fathers who teach their sons the language of Greece. To be sure, such a condemnation would have been pointless unless Greek was widely spoken among the Jews, as it was indeed not only in Alexandria in Egypt, which was the hub of Hellenistic Judaism, but also in Jewish Palestine, as Saul Lieberman has shown in a number of studies.<sup>4</sup>

It was the Greeks themselves, more precisely certain Greek ethnographers who, travelling in the wake of the armies of the Macedonian king Alexander, first called attention to the Jews whom they called “a race of philosophers.” This expression was used by no lesser than Theophrastus, whom Diogenes Laertius called “the most distinguished” among the students of Aristotle.<sup>5</sup> The question is what Theophrastus and his contemporaries, such as Hecataeus of Abdera, had in mind when they canonized the entire Jewish people as “philosophers?” What distinguished the Jews to deserve what, in Theophrastus’ view, could not but amount to extraordinary praise? To answer these questions it is helpful to consider the genre of literature in which these Greeks reported on Jews, Egyptians, and other nations they encountered in the wake of Alexander’s conquests.

Felix Jacoby, editor of an important edition of Greek historiographic fragments, calls the late 4th to early 3rd century ethnographic works of Greek historians, which are our main external sources of early Jewish history, “ethnographic utopias.” This genre of literature flourished after the “culmination of Greek theory of nature, culture, and the state in Plato and Democritus” and is “boosted by the

4 Saul Lieberman, *Greek in Jewish Palestine* (1942), idem, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine* (2nd ed. 1962), and idem, “How much Greek in Jewish Palestine?” in Alexander Altmann (ed.), *Biblical and Other Studies* (1963).

5 Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, V.(Ch.1)35, ed. R. D. Hicks (Loeb Classical Library), vol. I, p. 485. Cf. Arnaldo Momigliano, *Alien wisdom: The Limits of Hellenization*, Cambridge University Press, 1975, p. 85. It was Jacob Bernays who reconstructed parts of Theophrastus’ book *On Piety* from quotations in Porphyry’s treatise *On Abstinence*. See Bernays, *Theophrastus’ Schrift über die Frömmigkeit. Ein Beitrag zur Religionsgeschichte*, Berlin: Wilhelm Herz, 1866. According to Bernays, information about the Jews may have entered the Greek world as early as the beginning of the 4th century, when merchants also reported on Persian troop movements in Phoenicia. To be sure, early information about the Jews is hampered by the lack of a common language and by the formation of general hypotheses on the basis of insufficient information and false analogies. Thus Theophrastus understood the Jews to be a Syrian tribe that related to the other Syrians as the Brahmins related to the rest of Indian society, namely, as the “philosophical” tribe among them, and he misrepresented some of their sacrificial practices. See Bernays pp. 109-113.

great discoveries of the time of Alexander and his successors.” It “does not describe a people for its own sake but uses the historical-ethnographic material as a substrate in order to develop the ideal of a state or another philosophical theory in a fictitious or real people and thus in order to exert a practical-political influence, if possible.” According to Jacoby, this had already been the intention of Xenophon’s *Cyropedia*.<sup>6</sup> In this work, Xenophon describes the reorganization of the Persian armies under Cyrus on the model of Lacedaimonian (Spartan) society. Whether it is the Persians or the Jews, then, who are praised in Greek literature, it amounts to part and parcel of a rhetoric aiming at putting Athenian society to shame. If we remember the degree to which the philosophical movement associated with the names of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle was at odds with Athenian society, then we realize that praising these barbarians as philosophers was a polemical statement more than a genuine report on Jewish, Persian, or Egyptian practices. It conformed with the assumption, then common among Greek philosophical authors, that true knowledge was embedded in the constitutions of the most ancient societies and that it was necessary for the Athenians to learn from them.

When it comes to the ancient Jews themselves, Greek *paideia* seemed to offer them a way to participate in the new social and political order because it provided them with a legitimate reason for holding on to what had hitherto separated them from others, namely their rejection of polytheism. It allowed them to attribute continued relevance and meaning to their sacred traditions and practices, while at the same time integrating them into a larger world that shared many of their concerns. Greek philosophy confirmed rather than denigrated Jewish monotheism, a fact that was full of potential for a spiritual and political alliance. This may explain why Greek language and Hellenistic philosophy penetrated the Jewish community so quickly. To be sure, setting aside the translation of the Mosaic law, the first wave of Jewish Hellenistic writings seems to have been limited to an assertion of the antiquity of the Jews and of the congeniality between their laws and the primordial knowledge attributed to them by the Greek philosophical ethnographers. The major literary effort among 3rd century Hellenized Jews (e.g., Demetrius, Eupolemos, Aristobulos, and others cited by Eusebius in his *Preparatio Evangelica* and by other fathers of the church) was to prove from the antiquity of their own history that the Greeks must have learned philosophy from the ancient Jews.<sup>7</sup>

As a literary genre, Greek philosophical enthusiasm for the lifestyle of the Jewish priests was a short-lived phenomenon. As Arnaldo Momigliano points out in a study on “the limits of Hellenization,” the Greeks never took notice of the Greek

6 See Felix Jacoby, *Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker* (F Gr Hist), Dritter Teil: Geschichte von Staedten und Voelkern (Horoographie und Ethnographie), a: Kommentar zu Nr. 262-296. Unveränderter Neudruck, Leiden: Brill, 1954, p. 29 (my translation).

7 Momigliano, *Alien Wisdom*, p. 93.

translation of the Torah that, for the Jews of Alexandria, contained the philosophy of Moses. Initial praise gave way to a rather vicious literature of contempt, beginning with the Egyptian priest Manetho, who described the Jews as descended from an Egyptian colony of lepers led by a renegade priest from Heliopolis who taught them to follow laws that were the very opposite of everything the Egyptians considered sacred. In this and similar pagan works from late antiquity, the tenor of writing about the Jews is that they are a people of atheists and misanthropes.<sup>8</sup>

The idea of a fundamental harmony between Plato, Stoa, and Moses lived on among the Hellenized Jews and became an important tool in the defense of the Jews and Judaism under the Romans.<sup>9</sup> But it would be wrong to consider the philosophical literature of Hellenistic Judaism as a mere phenomenon of Jewish apologetics. That Greek wisdom entered the curriculum of the Jews of Alexandria and other cities under Greek rule leads to one of the great epoch-making moments in Western history. Greek philosophy formed Western thought not through the immediate agency of the works of the Greek philosophers themselves, many of which were in fact lost, but through the mediation of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim philosophers, all of whom were indebted to the decision of the Jews of Alexandria to translate the Torah into Greek and to interpret it in light of Greek wisdom.<sup>10</sup>

I believe we miss the significance of Philo of Alexandria's contribution to the history of Western thought if we consider him merely an anxious community leader who provides his parishioners with reasons not to abandon the Jewish way of life. Harry A. Wolfson was probably correct when he argued that the synthesis of Jewish belief and Greek wisdom accomplished by Philo by means of an allegorical interpretation established the foundation of Western thought until the time of Spinoza who was the first to consider this type of philosophical exegesis of Scripture fraudulent and detrimental to Scripture, philosophy, and the political community alike.<sup>11</sup> In other words, the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria is insufficiently comprehended if he is merely considered the first, and ultimately apologetic, Jewish philosopher and not also the inaugurator of the peculiar Western synthesis of Greek wisdom and biblical faith that by and large prevailed

8 On the origins of ancient anti-Jewish sentiments see Peter Schäfer, *Judeophobia. Attitudes Toward the Jews in the Ancient World*, Cambridge/Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998. Ironically, this bizarre and polemical literature would most likely have been forgotten, had it not been for Josephus whose defense against such authors as Manetho, Apollonius Molon (Julius Caesar's and Marcus Tullius Cicero's teacher of rhetoric), and Apion recorded their opinions and, via the Christian transmission of his works, made them an indelible part of Western literature about the Jews.

9 The works of Philo of Alexandria are the most excellent example of this trend.

10 The Alexandrians considered this Greek wisdom not just congenial with the wisdom of Moses but they considered Moses the teacher of the Greek philosophers. Thus for Philo and Josephus, Moses is not just a philosopher but the chief among all philosophers and, as the most ancient lawgiver, no less than the philosopher-king himself who established a perfect commonwealth, using a constitution that was unknown to the Greek authors who wrote about forms of government. Josephus was the first to call this unique and best form of government a "theocracy."

11 See Harry Austryn Wolfson, *Philo*, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1947, 2 vols.

among Jews, Christians, and Muslims throughout the Middle Ages and in some ways and contexts continues to prevail until today.

We note the historiographic and lexicographic complications entailed in these observations. Philo, Josephus, and the entire literature of Hellenistic Judaism, while obviously Jewish, became a fundamental part of the Christian and Western canon of philosophical thought but they were expurgated from the Jewish curriculum and they remained unknown or unacknowledged among the Jews for many centuries. After the destruction of the second temple and perhaps more decisively with the decline of the land of Israel as a center of Jewish economic and cultural productivity in the 5th century CE, philosophy or the wisdom of Greece loses traction among the Jews for almost half a millennium until it is revived under the Abbasids in the Baghdad renaissance of the 9th century.

This is not the time to recount the history of medieval philosophy. Suffice it to say that Jews participated in the revival of Greek wisdom among the Muslims. They wrote philosophical works in Arabic that were informed and inspired by the works of their Muslim peers, including theological defenses of the reasonableness of Jewish beliefs and practices and Aristotelian and neo-Platonic writings on the entire range of subjects covered by their Greek masters (to the degree that they were extant). Some of the works written by the Jewish philosophers rejected philosophy altogether and defended the biblical faith as superior, a literary stance also found among Muslims and Christians. Others attained classical status in their ability to establish strategies of reconciling the obvious tensions between the claims of the philosophers and the anthropomorphic language of scripture. Jewish philosophy survives the decline of the Abbasid caliphate in the east, and of the Umayyad caliphate in the west, by virtue of the activity of the great translators of the 12th and 13th century who recreated the works of the Judeo-Arab authors in Hebrew and created a philosophical terminology in this language that provided the foundation for a continuation of Jewish philosophical thought in the Roman-Catholic realm. Here, however, Jewish Aristotelianism and neo-Platonism competes with a strong mystical trend and the Maimonidean controversy in Southern France sets the stage for a decline of philosophical study among the Jews that was not reverted until the modern age.

### 3. Reflections on the canon of Jewish philosophers

The *Metzler Lexikon jüdischer Philosophen*, edited by Andreas Kilcher and Otfried Fraisse and published in 2003, is one of the most recent attempts to provide a

comprehensive synopsis of philosophical thinkers among the Jews.<sup>12</sup> The range of thinkers included can illustrate some of the problems entailed in establishing a canon of Jewish philosophers. For my purposes this lexicon is particularly helpful in that it chooses a different approach to Jewish philosophy than some of the well known histories of Jewish philosophy, such as Julius Guttman's famous and still fundamental work, *Philosophies of Judaism. A History of Jewish Philosophy from Biblical Times to Franz Rosenzweig*, and the more recent Routledge *History of Jewish Philosophy*, edited by Daniel H. Frank and Oliver Leaman. The original title of Guttman's book was *Die Philosophie des Judentums*. For Guttman, who was the son of a historian of medieval Jewish philosophy and one of the last pillars of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* movement, never articulates what he considers the "essence" of Judaism, but it is clear that the center of gravity of the philosophy of Judaism is in its religion, which in turn is founded on the ethical monotheism of the biblical prophets. Whether or not it is philosophy in the Greek sense is not the prevailing or important question. But to this neo-Kantian, it is clear that the essence of religion, in the Jewish sense, is belief in God, and belief in God is ultimately belief in the moral obligation of man. The first edition of Guttman's book traces this ethical monotheism from its biblical origins to the thought of Hermann Cohen. The revised and enlarged Hebrew edition on which the American translation is based changes the title to the plural ("philosophies" instead of "philosophy") and allows for this set of traditions to culminate in the thought of Franz Rosenzweig without altering its fundamental concern with "religion" as the center of gravity of the philosophy of Judaism. As Leo Strauss pointed out in a famous critique of the first edition of Guttman's book, Guttman considers the modern understanding of religion and hence of the philosophy of religion superior to the medieval interpretation of Jewish law in that it provides a deeper appreciation of biblical religion in its ethical focus. In contrast, Strauss argues that the modern philosophical understanding of religion is no longer philosophically sound because it has secularized the religious idea of the good and hence entered into a synthesis with religion that corrupts both philosophy and religion. In contrast, so Strauss, Maimonides remained true to the Platonic theory of law, as articulated in the *Nomoi*, and hence refrained from synthesizing what cannot and ought not to be synthesized, namely, philosophy and law. With one stroke, Strauss dismisses virtually the entire modern canon from the list of Jewishly or philosophically relevant writings.

In contrast to Guttman, the editors and contributors to the Routledge *History of Jewish Philosophy* do not suggest that there is an ascertainable or tacitly assumed "essence" of Judaism, nor are they beholden to a schema of historical progress.

<sup>12</sup> Metzler Lexikon jüdischer Philosophen: Philosophisches Denken des Judentums von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart. Edited by Andreas B. Kilcher and Otfried Fraisse with Yossef Schwartz. Stuttgart and Weimar: Verlag J. B. Metzler, 2003, reviewed in Religious Studies Review 30: 2,3 (July 2004), p. 217.

Instead, they hope to restore the Jewish participants and Jewish participation in the plural conversation on philosophy over the ages and thus to contribute to a less “imperialistic” view of Western cultural history. This intention articulates an absence of clearly defined boundaries of Jewish philosophy and the result is an oddly bloodless set of chapters that cover the same range of thinkers that are familiar from Guttman’s account without providing any further going justification for this canon. The presuppositions of Guttman’s account are reduced to a historical episode (“Nineteenth century German Reform philosophy”), the institutional framework that tied Guttman’s original work to a larger system of disciplines is reduced to an ideology (“The Ideology of Wissenschaft des Judentums”), and more recent developments are merely grouped as “Contemporary Jewish Philosophy,” whereby the singular of the chapter heading belies the lack of any attempt at inner cohesion. The result is a disengaging sequence of chapters that one might turn to for basic information but that provides no definition or argument of a larger sort about the specific qualities of Jewish philosophy or Jewish philosophers.

Returning to Kilcher and Fraisse’s *Lexikon*, the main editor, Andreas Kilcher, indicates in his introduction that the editors prefer to make “Jewish philosophy” a matter of interpretation rather than definition (p. XVI). The history of the historiography of Jewish philosophy and thus of the canonification of certain thinkers as Jewish philosophers begins, according to Kilcher, with bishop Guillaume d’Auvergne’s 13th-century classification of certain authors as *Hebraei philosophi* (p. VIII). To be sure, Kilcher emphasizes that this concerns merely the history of the concept, and not of the philosophical pursuit itself. It seems significant, however, that until the 19th-century Wissenschaft des Judentums movement with its efforts to elevate the study of Jewish history and literature to the level of an academic discipline, interest in the Hebrew or Jewish philosophers was a concern for learned Christians rather than for learned Jews. Christian Hebraism was equally interested in the Jewish neo-Platonists and Aristotelians as in the Kabbalists. In fact, it was a widely shared assumption that Kabbalah represented the esoteric philosophy and the true metaphysical doctrine of the Jews (and hence the inner truth of the Mosaic Torah) while the rationalist and Aristotelian doctrines of Maimonides and others were merely their exoteric form. Guttman and others who were interested in a Jewish philosophy of religion largely dismissed Jewish mysticism as merely mythological and hence sub-philosophical. In this they followed the Kantian dismissal of traditional metaphysics, which had shifted religion to a correlation with ethics. Kilcher and Fraisse, on the other hand, remain true to the Christian historiographical tradition of Jewish philosophy and include in their *Lexikon* not just a considerable number of kabbalistic thinkers, from Isaak the Blind to Isaak Luria, but oddly also propagandists and practical Kabbalists such as Nathan of Gaza and Shabetai Tsevi. The standard for inclusion in their canon of Jewish

philosophers becomes particularly opaque in their selection of modern thinkers. Of a total of 193 entries, 118 entries are dedicated to people (mostly men) born between 1700 and 1934. This makes it appear as if the modern period was by far the most productive time for Jewish philosophers to be active. But if even Walter Rathenau is among the Jewish philosophers, why then not also Rosa Luxemburg? Was Israel ben Eliezer a.k.a. the “Besht”, a philosopher? Was Fritz Mauthner preoccupied with the Jewish question, but not Karl Marx? Was Benno Jacob a philosopher, and were Constantin Brunner’s writings a contribution to Jewish philosophy?

The somewhat erratic selection and the preferred inclusion of modern German Jewish intellectuals clearly plays to common sentiments and well established patterns in German popular science publications on Jewish themes. When dealing with the Jewish intellectual achievements of the past, the entries often appeal to the feelings of loss, guilt, and shame putatively held by the intended educated German readers.<sup>13</sup> The Lexikon can therefore do without a solid criterion of exclusion. We’ve almost come full circle. Here it suffices to be part of the Jewish people and to have published a few philosophical books in order to qualify as a member of the race of philosophers.

With this rather disconcerting set of symptoms as a backdrop I turn to some observations I found in the writings of Gillian Rose that may have some bearing on how to become a Jewish philosopher if by this we mean inclusion in a canon of Jewish philosophers and if by this approach we hope to shed some light on the peculiar pursuit known (or unknown) as Jewish philosophy. Gillian Rose is not included in Kilcher and Fraisse’s Lexikon, most likely because she was born too recently (namely, in 1947) to have qualified but also perhaps because she had herself received into the Anglican Church shortly before she succumbed to ovarian cancer. She died in 1995. It is not easy to determine Gillian Rose’s position. She wrote her dissertation on Theodor W. Adorno (listed in Kilcher and Fraisse) but she did so under the anti-Marxist Leszek Kolakowski.<sup>14</sup> For a while, Rose was a neo-Hegelian philosopher who believed that Hegel could be read in a manner that avoided the pitfalls of the usual split between theological or right-wing and political or left-wing interpretations. In a volume of philosophical essays on *Judaism and Modernity*, published in 1993, she brings her often brilliantly “masked”<sup>15</sup> readings to bear on the question of a Jewish philosophy. In fact, one of her essays has the title, “Is there a Jewish philosophy?” What I find particularly

13 Among the consistent exceptions to this shortcoming are the entries by Carlos Fraenkel and Otfried Fraisse, which invariably meet the highest scholarly standards and are a pleasure to read.

14 For this and the following cf. Arnold J. Wolf, “The tragedy of Gillian Rose - Jewish social critic” in *Judaism* (Fall 1997), found at [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m0411/is\\_n4\\_v46/ai\\_20583585](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0411/is_n4_v46/ai_20583585) (accessed Oct. 9, 2007).

15 See the poignant description in Howard Caygill’s obituary for Gillian Rose in the journal *Radical Philosophy*, at [http://www.radicalphilosophy.com/default.asp?channel\\_id=2191&editorial\\_id=9844](http://www.radicalphilosophy.com/default.asp?channel_id=2191&editorial_id=9844).

heartening about Gillian Rose's writing on Jewish philosophy is that she takes on what has by now become a hardened if poorly justified enthusiasm for the postmodern among students of Jewish philosophy.

Here is how she begins her book.

#### Preface

A friend has suggested that I preface this book with an *apologia pro vita sua* along the lines in which Franz Rosenzweig tried to explain his return to Judaism in his letter to Friedrich Meinecke declining the offer of a university post. This apology from 1920 seems uncannily to converge with the growing tendency nowadays to present theoretical work with a declaration of one's personal as well as one's academic qualifications and interests: 'I write 'as a woman', 'as a Jew', and so on. [We are reminded of the introductory apology to the hurried reader of the title of this paper.]

She continues:

My trajectory displays no such logic. If I knew who or what I were, I would not write: I write out of those moments of anguish which are nameless and I am able to write only where the tradition can offer me a discipline, a means, to articulate and explore that anguish. Against the self-image of the age, it has been *within the philosophical tradition*, which for me includes social, political and religious thought, that I have found the resources for the exploration of this identity and lack of identity, this independence and dependence, this power and powerlessness. My difficulty is not addressed in any rejection of that tradition which would settle for only one side of my predicament: lack of identity, dependence, powerlessness, or any account of otherness which theorizes solely exclusion and control.

It is this *speculative* account of experience, which persists in acknowledging the predicament of identity and lack of identity, independence and dependence, power and powerlessness, that has led me to Judaism. Or, rather, it is by working through my difficulty in the ratio and the crises of modern philosophy that I discover myself in the middle of the ratio and crises of modern Judaism.

Thus identified in her commitment to both the modern philosophical project and absorbed by the inevitability of engaging with Judaism as a modern phenomenon, Rose names that which she is running up against, against which she asserts her otherwise elusive and uncategorized self:

I have not arrived at Judaism as the sublime Other of modernity – whether as the moment of divine excess from Kant's third Critique, as the living but worldless community from Rosenzweig, as the devastating ethical commandment of Levinas, as trace and writing from deconstruction. Nor have I discovered Judaism waiting at the end of the end of philosophy, Judaism

redivivus out of the ashes of the Holocaust: as the Jewish return into history for Fackenheim, as the issue of modernity for [Zygmunt] Bauman, and as the terrible essence of the West for Lacoue-Labarthe.

In this list, a list of names that the author unmask as Jewish or perhaps pseudo-Jewish imperatives that are to be resisted, Rose provides us with an anti-canon of Jewish philosophers that includes Kant, who, while not a Jew, nevertheless served to Cohen, Guttman, and the entire *Wissenschaft des Judentums* as the measure of Jewish ethical monotheism; it includes Rosenzweig, whose works are central to virtually all canons of modern Jewish thinkers and whose “new” or “speech thinking” opened the path also for Levinas and his “radicalization of ethics” (Gibbs);<sup>16</sup> it includes Emil Fackenheim, Zygmunt Bauman, and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe who theorized the Holocaust in different ways but all considered it an event that disclosed an essential truth about modernity, Jewish or otherwise. Rose stands up to resist all of these most widely shared corner posts of modern Jewish philosophizing.

This is how she continues:

No. I write out of the discovery that both recent philosophy, in its turn to what I name new ethics, and modern Jewish philosophy, in its ethical self-representations, are equally uncomfortable with any specific reflection on modern law and the state, which they assimilate to the untempered domination of Western metaphysics. Rome haunts the agon between Athens and Jerusalem, but only the imperial Roman eagle has been admitted, while the Rome which invented private property law, the law of persons, and separated it from citizenship is forgotten because it is so familiar. In the eagerness to eschew the metaphysics of subjectivity, recent philosophy and Jewish philosophy lose the means to discern the structuring of our anxiety, the modern mix of freedom and unfreedom in civil society and the state which continues to contour our subjectivity and which cannot be abjured. Having renounced teleological philosophy of history, general philosophy produces in its place the newly purified polarity of reason and ethics, which Jewish philosophy, scared of the charge of Pharisaical legalism, intensifies with its purified polarity of law and love. Philosophy and Judaism want to proclaim a New Testament which will dispose of the broken promises of modernity.

Permit me to pass over these passages without comment and add just a few more lines before making a few concluding remarks.

I write out of the violence infecting these philosophical purifications which ignore their own preconditions and outcomes. I write out of the feigned

<sup>16</sup> See my review of Robert Gibbs, *Correlations in Rosenzweig and Levinas* (New Haven/Ct.: Yale University Press, 1992), in *Textual Reasoning. Journal of the Postmodern Jewish Philosophy Network*, volume 4.1 (Febr. 1995) at [http://etext.virginia.edu/journals/tr/archive/pmjp/pmjp4\\_1.html](http://etext.virginia.edu/journals/tr/archive/pmjp/pmjp4_1.html).

innocence of the 'and' in Judaism and Modernity. This is my *apologia pro vita sua*: the only way I can approach my life is by attempting to explore how the difficulties with which I engage may articulate that life. The speculative method of engaging with the new purifications whenever they occur, in order to yield their structuring but unacknowledged third, involves deployment of the resources of reason and of its crisis, of identity and lack of identity. This results in what I call the facetious style – the mix of severity and irony, with many facets and forms, which presents the discipline of the difficulty.

"Is there a Jewish philosophy?" Gillian Rose asks toward the end of her essay by that name (p. 23). "I hope," she continues, "that by now you no longer know the answer to this question."

I want to augment this rhetorical move with a passage from Hannah Arendt's *Denktagebuch*. Arendt writes about the Socratic approach to justice: *What is justice? The more I think about it, the less I know the answer, and the more just I become*. The same seems true for Gillian Rose as a Jewish philosopher and, we might add, as a philosopher: the more she asks the question, the less she knows the answer, and the more of a Jewish philosopher she becomes, even though, in her death-bed conversion, she attempts to prevent her inclusion in any future canon of Jewish philosophers.

Our question was: How does one become a Jewish philosopher? The simple answer is, by being included in a canon of Jewish philosophers. But, as we saw, canons are problematic and the intentions behind these canons are often alien to what may be legitimately considered philosophical or Jewish. We also found, however, that a Jewish philosopher appeared to us in her unmaking of a canon of Jewish philosophers. I submit that this criterion may hold not just for Jewish philosophy but may equally apply to other philosophies.

# SANDU FRUNZĂ

## Aspects of the connection between Judaism and Christianity in Franz Rosenzweig's philosophy

### **Abstract:**

The novelty in Rosenzweig's new ways of thinking lies in the fact that, unlike the traditional view, in his thought philosophy is the discipline containing a subjective element, whereas religion is more objective since it is founded on revelation. These complementary differences help the philosopher rethink Judaism and Jewish identity in the context of the spiritual crisis of the secularized Judaism of his time. Starting with the analysis of this reconstruction of philosophy, this text attempts to present a balanced perspective on Rosenzweig's vision of the relation between Judaism and Christianity. We will not single out the common elements or those that separate these two monotheist religions; setting Judaism and Christianity on the same level is considered to be a compensatory gesture towards Judaism and Jewish tradition. There is in Rosenzweig a significant moment of approach toward Christianity, especially to a Christianity without Christ, but Rosenzweig opts for a different solution, that of building a new philosophy based on Judaism. Moshe Idel's analysis suggests that it is the Kabbalistic mysticism that Rosenzweig redefines in order to propose a new way of thought based on both philosophy and religion. Thus, Rosenzweig gives new meaning to the balance of divine and human in the field of religion.

### Between philosophy and religion

Rosenzweig is a timely thinker. The thematization of death, the philosophy of daily life, the re-thinking of tradition, the placing of the individual at the center of all significant religious activities of a community, the philosophy of language, the new thinking, the new dialogical situation, the very personal way of analyzing the relation between Judaism and Christianity in the troubled 20th century, as well as

many other themes present in his writings, have led historians of ideas to conclude that Rosenzweig is the most influential Jewish thinker of the century.

It is difficult to position him under any single label within Jewish thought. Moshe Idel tends to place Rosenzweig's thinking in the field of theology. This is best explained in relation to Idel's own interest in the mystical sources and dimensions on which Rosenzweig's works are built. This interest reveals the theological dimension, deliberately neglecting, as of secondary importance, its philosophical relevance. But, the theological and mystical premises revealed by Idel and developed by Warren Zev Harvey and by Rivka Horwitz are used to build a philosophical view that, in spite of its speculative undertone, claims to be a philosophy of an experience lived as daily life.

Steven T. Katz also advocates a point of view that places Rosenzweig in the field of theology. Although he discusses Rosenzweig's thinking in terms of a Jewish philosophy, he shows that in *The Star of Redemption* the author "tries to formulate a 'new thinking' to outline a history of culture, and to propose a philosophical theology of Judaism and Christianity."<sup>1</sup>

In turn, Samuel Hugo Bergman considers that "*The Star of Redemption* is an attempt at a Jewish theology."<sup>2</sup> Placing Rosenzweig's philosophy in its own cultural context, he tries to find an answer to the question: what can determine a young man to write a treaty of Jewish theology? and finds the answer in the situation of Judaism in Rosenzweig's times. Traditional Judaism stopped fulfilling the religious needs of a significant number of the members of the Jewish community. First of all, the traditional Jewish family, which was marked by religious practice and bore the responsibility of guarantor of the continuity of tradition, was showing signs of disintegration. Second, Bergman notices a general crisis determined by the modernization of Judaism, which in the end had the consequence that a considerable number of Jews showed a growing interest in Christianity. This orientation towards Christianity had a double motivation: on the one hand, it was the lack of religious practice in secularized families, and on the other hand the factual movement toward Christianity, revealed by Rosenzweig: „We are Christians in everything. We live in a Christian state, attend Christian schools, read Christian books, in short, our whole culture rests entirely on Christian foundations." In this situation, Rosenzweig notes, we should not be amazed to find that some Jews want to become Christians. In answer to this crisis, "Rosenzweig has become a man of faith."<sup>3</sup> This option can be considered symbolic from the point of view of the new approach to the individual in Rosenzweig's thinking. Philosophical and theological elements are combined in a unique construct meant to explain the

1 Steven T. Katz, *Jewish Philosophers* (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House Jerusalem LTD, 1975), 185.

2 Samuel Hugo Bergman, *Faith and Reason: An Introduction to Modern Jewish Thought*, Translated and Edited by Alfred Jospe (New York: Schocken Books, 1961), 56.

3 Bergman, *Faith and Reason*, 59.

new position of the individual in the world and a new means of understanding the way in which one creates a destiny. This construction, in Bergman's opinion, is first of all a theological one. It concerns a theology in which Rosenzweig reaches the conclusion that: "a union of reason and faith is possible,"<sup>4</sup> that a union between philosophy and theology is authentic, because *the new thinking* claimed by the cultural and religious situation of the beginning of the 20th century must be regarded from the point of view of a philosophy seen as an interest towards people in general and of a religion as an interest towards people as individuals. In this way, "Rosenzweig's philosophy and theology are based on the centrality of the individual."<sup>5</sup>

Philosophy must overcome its reservations about theology, just as theology should confront its fear of philosophy. Considering the fact that the human being must be understood in the context of the God-Man-World interaction, Rosenzweig believes that all the problems related to the human condition, which by implication includes the religious dimension, are much too complex to be left exclusively in the hands of theologians. That is why philosophy must start from the personal existential situation of the philosopher. In comparison with the old philosophy, the new way of thinking has to start from the human subjectivity, from the way in which the individual finds its own self in the world. Thus the question: how then can we reach objectivity in knowledge? Rosenzweig asserts that in this situation, philosophy needs theology. Philosophy must begin from the premise that the humankind is recipient of revelation, that this revelation is manifested objectively in humanity. The complementarities between philosophy and theology are in fact the complementarities between subjective and objective. That is why Rosenzweig chooses a new way of thinking promoted by "a new type of theologian or philosopher, a type that stands between philosophy and theology."<sup>6</sup>

The preoccupation of the philosopher with the religious and the effort to bind the two ways of thinking is characteristic of Jewish philosophy. This bond transforms philosophy and theology from *ways of thinking* to *ways of being*, meaning that it situates them under the sign of existential commandments. We cannot conceive of Jewish philosophy outside a specific way of understanding the relationship between philosophical meditation and religious tradition. Rosenzweig tries to avoid the situation created by the relationship between philosophy and theology as expressed in the medieval Christian way of thinking. Thus, "theology must

4 Bergman, *Faith and Reason*, 59. On relationship between philosophy and religion, reason and faith in Jewish philosophy see Michael Zank, „Zwischen den Stühlen? On the Taxonomic Anxieties of Modern Jewish Philosophy“, *EJJS* (Leiden Koninklijke Brill NV, 2007), 105-134; Sandu Frunzã, „Jewish Philosophy and the Metaphor of Returning to Jerusalem“, *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, 13 (Spring 2006): 128-138.

5 Bergman, *Faith and Reason*, 55.

6 Franz Rosenzweig, „The New Thinking“ in *Franz Rosenzweig: His life and Thought*, ed. by Nahum N. Glazer (New York: Schocken Books, 1961), 208.

not debase philosophy to play the part of handmaid, yet the role of charwoman which philosophy has recently assigned to theology is just as humiliating. The true relationship of these two regenerated sciences is a sisterly one, and this must necessarily lead to the personal union of those who deal with them. Theological problems must be translated into human terms, and human problems brought into the pale of theology.<sup>7</sup> Following this way, Rosenzweig offers philosophical solutions to issues that are quite evidently theological. This is the case insofar as the relationship between Judaism and Christianity is concerned; otherwise, from the perspective of the theological answer given to this problem, he could be considered a heretic by both traditional Christianity and Judaism. It is beyond any doubt that his analyses are integrated in a discursive logic other than that of theology.

An attempt to position Rosenzweig's philosophy can be found in the work of Ignaz Maybaum. Placing him in the context of his time, he asks himself, "Can we call Rosenzweig an existentialist philosopher?" He includes Rosenzweig's philosophy as a distinct voice within existentialism. This philosophy is revealed to Maybaum as being the last desperate attempt of 20th century thinkers to find a solution to the cultural, religious, and political crisis of their declining world. Preceding philosophies were not able to find an answer to the existential problems of humankind. Rosenzweig finds the right solution by binding the rational step of philosophy with the existential answers offered by faith. Thus, "where the philosophy of three and half millennia fails him, Rosenzweig turns to Judaism."<sup>8</sup>

To help us understand the way in which Rosenzweig uses Judaism, Maybaum suggests that we remember an essential distinction that differentiates "between Jewish trust and Christian faith." In this way Rosenzweig sustains arguments showing that if the Christian belief, in general, marks the limits of reason by underlining the conflict between reason and faith, in the tradition of the Hebrew Bible there is no such conflict. Thus, "The Jew has no need to defeat reason by faith, because his faith is not a philosophical faith. Jewish trust and Christian faith mirror two different situations: Jewish existence and Christian existence differ."<sup>9</sup> The results of Rosenzweig's critique of traditional philosophizing have no connection with a critique of the specific rational step of philosophy. Maybaum, among others, deserves the credit for noticing that this critique is oriented against that form of abstract thinking that tries to explain all aspects of life through an abstract category of the whole. This thinking does not take into consideration the

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7 Rosenzweig, 121.

8 Ignaz Maybaum, "Franz Rosenzweig and the Existentialist Philosophers" in *Jewish Philosophy and Philosophers*, ed. by Raymond Goldwater (London: The Hillel Foundation, 1962), 178.

9 Maybaum, 179. "Trust cannot come into conflict with reason. Trust is rooted in existence. Existence is mute but it cannot err. That is the strength of existence. It is meaningful to speak of Jewish existence", writes Maybaum in "Franz Rosenzweig and the Existentialist Philosophers", 181.

distinction between God, man, and world, and the specific relations created by these. These fundamental elements cannot be reduced to empty concepts, nor can they be reduced to one of empty concept. This reductionism is criticized as being dominant for views like mysticism, materialism, and idealism, each of which reduces the three aforementioned elements into one.<sup>10</sup> Maybaum is preoccupied with finding a solution for philosophy, which “has arrived at a dead end.” He advises us to notice that the salvation of philosophy may lie in the solution proposed by Rosenzweig, who understood that “any progress, making philosophy again capable of participation in the tasks of our civilization, demands a union of philosophy and theology. If reason is not treated contemptuously and if theology accepts the discipline of philosophy, that is to say, of abstract thinking, the warning that a union of philosophy and theology heralds a return to the Middle Ages is unfounded. The union of philosophy and theology can be the New Philosophy for which our age is groping. ... The New Philosophy will mark progress or it will not be.”<sup>11</sup>

This philosophy is oriented toward exegesis, because only thus can it remain dynamic and alive. It discusses the power of the word, which has always had a prophetic dimension for Jewish thinkers. It is not only about the power of the prophetic word, which is derived from the fact that when the prophet speaks, “God takes possession of his lips;” but also about the existential transfiguration of the one that assumes the prophetic word. The fact that Rosenzweig will create a new philosophy of language, a philosophy of communication between the three fundamental elements (man, God, world), is not a simple coincidence. Rosenzweig writes: “Language stamps the sign of God and man upon all the things of this world.”<sup>12</sup> In Rosenzweig’s case, this is about the word that makes heard the interior voice both of philosophy and theology. In order to show the importance of this new engagement of the two spiritual creations in discourse and the impact of this cooperation, Maybaum integrates Rosenzweig into the history of Jewish philosophy, stating: “Our generation has to realize gratefully that what Yehuda Halevi and Maimonides were to medieval Jewry, Rosenzweig is to modern Jewry – a guide for the perplexed.”<sup>13</sup>

## Back to Judaism

Both Judaism and Christianity hold the truth. This affirmation is one of the fundamental premises that lead Rosenzweig to try and build his own philosophical

<sup>10</sup> Maybaum, 180.

<sup>11</sup> Maybaum, 180-181.

<sup>12</sup> Franz Rosenzweig, *Understanding the Sick and the Healthy. A View of World, Man, and God*, Edited with an Introduction by N. N. Glazer (New York: The Noonday Press, 1954), 61.

<sup>13</sup> Maybaum, 200.

system. He takes one step further in claiming that in fact, each one of these, as religions, represents only a partial truth, because only God holds the whole truth. Rosenzweig makes this equality between Judaism and Christianity even more problematic by observing that God did not create religions but the world;<sup>14</sup> thus, the relation between the truth of man, creator of religions, and the truth of God becomes relative.

However, this is not an attempt to advocate relativism: Rosenzweig's thinking is orientated against both relativism and absolutism. This relativization is intended to emphasize Rosenzweig's firm choice for the truth of Judaism that keeps him closer to God.

But it is not this relativization that surprises Rosenzweig's readers. What is surprising is the setting Judaism and Christianity on the same level, a setting that on the one hand totally contradicts the theological Jewish tradition that has seen Christianity as a secondary creation and on the other hand, contradicts Christian tradition that sets Christianity in a position of higher standing compared to Judaism and of fulfillment by outgrowing it. Far from being taken up by other thinkers, Rosenzweig's vision turns out to be disapproved by his Jewish friends and criticized, sometimes vehemently, by his Christian friends.

Despite all these, Rosenzweig represents a paradigmatic figure for a possible dialogue between Judaism and Christianity. His personal experience is convincing in this sense. He is representative of the modern Jew's effort to preserve his tradition and identity under the conditions of a twofold external temptation. On one hand, there is the pressure of illuminist ideology. Haskala advised the Jews to adapt and keep up with the renewing trend of Western civilization. On the other hand, as a consequence of this pressure, a part of European Jewry chose to convert to Christianity.

In the beginning, Rosenzweig is somewhere in between these tendencies. On one hand, despite the formal connection he had with religion, he was part of a secularized family. On the other hand, some of his friends and relatives had already taken the path of Christianity. Writing about Rosenzweig, one often mentions two of his most formative experiences: the night in Leipzig and the celebration of Yom Kippur.

"The night in Leipzig" was an event which became representative for the dilemma faced by many Jewish intellectuals at the beginning of the 20th century. Members of many Jewish families strongly influenced by modernity chose to leave the religion of their fathers and convert to Christianity. One such person was Rosenzweig himself, who went to Leipzig to study law; there, he met the young philosopher and theologian Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, with whom he had a series of conversation. In 1912 he completed his PhD with a dissertation concerning the influential thought of Hegel on the problem of the state. In 1913,

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14 Rosenzweig, "The New Thinking", 201.

on the night of July 7th, the two friends had a conversation in which Rosenzweig, who was studying history and philosophy, defended the relativist point of view, and Rosenstock-Huessy defends the point of view of revelation, of the man that was the adept of prayer and wisdom, of practicing faith in the field of action.<sup>15</sup> This conversation causes Rosenzweig to reflect upon the possibility of converting to Christianity.

Rosenzweig did not see this conversion as abandoning the faith of his ancestors, but more as a possibility of reawakening it. This thought was based on the observation that Judaism was no longer a living religion and on the need to find a bridge between revelation and personal daily life.<sup>16</sup> His decision did not assume the rejection of his Jewish origins, but rather "the consummation of Judaism in Christianity."<sup>17</sup> It is in this sense that he writes in a letter to Rudolf Ehrenberg that, "In this world, then, there appeared to be no place for Judaism. I drew the consequences from that, and, in so doing, imposed a condition on myself, a condition whose importance to me you know well. I declared that I could only become a Christian as a Jew, not by way of the intermediate status of paganism."<sup>18</sup>

In trying to understand Rosenzweig's steps, we must keep in mind this essential aspect: his conversion to the Christian faith would be different from that of a non-Jew. He expresses the belief that an authentic conversion is possible only in maintaining his own Judaism. This emphasis helps us adequately understand the reasoning of that the philosopher in so far as the relationship between Judaism and Christianity is concerned. In this sense, Rivka Horwitz's extremely subtle statements are very convincing: she noticed that Rosenzweig's dilemma was not triggered by his mistrust concerning the truths of Judaism, or by his beliefs regarding the truth of the Christian faith. The new argument we find in Rosenzweig, which tells us that both Judaism and Christianity hold the truth, can be used to explain a series of biographical developments: "The possibility of a dialogue between the Jew and Christian convinced Rosenzweig that there was no necessity to convert."<sup>19</sup>

We need to mention the fact that, before actually converting to Christianity, Rosenzweig turned his attention to his own religious tradition. This renewed encounter with tradition, in 1913, was occasioned by Rosenzweig's participation

15 Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, "Prologue/Epilogue to the Letters – Fifty Years Later" in *Judaism Despite Christianity. The "Letters on Christianity and Judaism" between Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy and Franz Rosenzweig*, ed. by Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy (Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1969) 72-73.

16 Revelation is a central concept in Rosenzweig's thinking.

17 Katz, *Jewish Philosophers*, 184.

18 Franz Rosenzweig, "Selections from the Letters" in *Jewish perspectives on Christianity*, ed. by Fritz A. Rothschild (New York: Continuum, 1996), 169.

19 Rivka Horwitz, "From Hegelianism to a Revolutionary Understanding of Judaism: Franz Rosenzweig's Attitude Toward Kabbala and Myth", *Modern Judaism*, 26, 1 (2006): 48.

to the Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) celebration in a small synagogue in Berlin. In the Jewish tradition, this is a celebration with the highest degree of intellectual involvement and personal and communitarian experience. In this context Rosenzweig rediscovers himself and decides: "I will remain a Jew." In other words, he decides to stay within a Judaism he had not known well enough to practice. The process of this transformation may be seen in the exchange of letters he has with Rosenstock-Huessy: "How Franz defended his new position makes the contents of these letters, but in them, the pendulum swings from faith in the Christian revelation to a faith in Moses and the Prophets, and both faiths have their day in court."<sup>20</sup>

There is a very complex element in the structure of Rosenzweig's relations both to Judaism and Christianity, as noted by Horwitz, we emphasized Rosenzweig's statements after he decides to remain Jewish where he underlined the fact that his faith was always the Jewish faith. From Rosenzweig's letters she learns that "he was not drawn to Christianity by Christ but rather by his Christian friends. Because he loved his friends dearly and was deeply attached to them, he did not want to leave them." This belonging to a community, this attachment to his friends, is very much considered decisive in Rosenzweig's experience, rather than his preference for the Christian truth in relation to that of Judaism. In this relation of sharing common experience with his Christian friends, Rosenzweig finds his own sense of fundamental virtues, such as faith, love, and hope. Regarding the importance of the very close relation Rosenzweig has with his friends, Horwitz concludes: "his relation to them he calls his love experience."<sup>21</sup>

Thus, beyond the theological background of his experiences and dilemmas, Rosenzweig's personal experience is translated more in terms of a new understanding of friendship than in terms of an experience of Christ that might have caused him to make the decisive step to actually convert to Christianity. In a letter to Rudolf Ehrenberg, Rosenzweig states that he agrees with what Christ's church states regarding John 14:6, "no one comes to the Father except through Me." But he is convinced that this mediation of the access to redemption through Christ does not refer to those who do not need to come to the Father, because they have always been with Him. Finding himself a member of the community of faith of his ancestors, Rosenzweig writes: "No one comes to the father – but

20 Rosenstock-Huessy, "Prologue/Epilogue to the Letters – Fifty Years Later", 75.

21 To describe this experience, Rivka Horwitz cites one fragment from Rosenzweig's letters: "I have not experienced at that whole time, from August to September 1913 for one moment Christ himself, but always Eugen and next to Eugen a little bit you. But primarily Eugen. If it had been otherwise, then I would certainly, after all what I know be a Christian. But it was not so. My whole experience was also then [1913] not Christ, (an experience of faith) but Christians (an experience of love). My experience of faith remained all the time Jewish, as you know. And in the moment when I experienced for the first time the hope, once and for all, on the first day of my arrival in Berlin, there I found the objective basis: the contradiction between my love experience and my faith". Horwitz, 50.

it is different when one no longer needs to come to the father because he is already with him. And this is the case with the people of Israel (not with the individual Jew). The people of Israel, chosen by its Father, fixes its glance on that ultimate, most distant point, beyond world and history, where its Father, the father himself, will be the One and the Only – will be 'All in All!'"<sup>22</sup>

## From The Life of Jesus to a new understanding of Judaism

In the context of the present study, Moshe Idel makes the following pertinent statement: in the first text Rosenzweig writes after deciding to remain a member of the Jewish community, entitled *Atheistic Theology*, the author refers to David F. Strauss' "The Life of Jesus" and claims that Strauss' liberal vision on the birth of God out of man is borrowed from ancient mysticism.<sup>23</sup> Rosenzweig evokes Strauss and his work *The Life of Jesus*, to show that he opposes to an act of creation based on ancient mysticism another creation of mysticism, based this time on a mysticism of Kabbalistic origin. Rosenzweig rejects the "atheist" premises of this theology because they presuppose the reduction of the transcendent God to an expression of the divine born out of human experience. Moshe Idel notes that "aided by a speculative interpretation of Jewish mysticism and myth, Rosenzweig is able to offer an alternative to *atheistic theology*."<sup>24</sup> This intuition of Strauss' mystical resorts was also confirmed by Albert Schweitzer, who wrote: "Hegel's philosophy had set him free, giving him a higher plane of Christological speculation, and opening his eyes to the mystic interpretation of finitude and infinity, God and man."<sup>25</sup>

Even after two hundred years,<sup>26</sup> Strauss remains a complex and controversial personality, as do his works. He may be seen as a theologian or as a philosopher, or as one of the fathers of the school of biblical criticism, among the "demonized" figures of anti-Christianity, or among the inspired authors of the 19th century. Albert Schweitzer states that a thorough understanding of his work requires

22 Rosenzweig, „Selections from the Letters”, 170.

23 Moshe Idel, „Franz Rosenzweig and Kabbalah” in *The Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig*, ed. by Paul Mendes-Flohr (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1988), 162. Other texts by Idel in *JSR*: Moshe Idel, „«Unio Mystica» as a Criterion: Some Observations on «Hegelian» Phenomenologies of Mysticism”, *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, 1 (spring 2002): 19-41; Moshe Idel, „Abordări metodologice în studiile religioase”, *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, 18 (Spring 2007): 5-20. About Moshe Idel see Sandu Frunză, „Aspecte ale raportului dintre filosofie și esoterism în interpretarea lui Moshe Idel”, *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, 10 (spring 2005): 102-115.

24 Idel, „Franz Rosenzweig and Kabbalah”, 168.

25 Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of Historical Jesus. A critical Study of its progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, With a preface by F. C. Burkitt (New York: The Macmillian Company, 1910), 79.

26 David Friederich Strauss was born on the 27th of January 1808.

a certain amount of empathy with his person and his thinking: "In order to understand Strauss one must love Him. He was not the greatest, and not the deepest, of theologians, but he was the most absolutely sincere. His insight and his errors were alike the insight and the errors of a prophet."<sup>27</sup>

To understand the importance of David Strauss' work and to see what is still relevant today in his thinking, we can recall the five points in which Peter C. Hodgson synthesizes its meaning: 1) „*The Life of Jesus* represented a watershed in the development of a critical method for the study of the Gospels;” 2) „Strauss called radically into question the appeal to history as a basis of faith, and he seriously undermined the historical character of the Christian faith, not so much by frontal attack as by the cumulative weight of his minutely detailed analysis;” 3) „Strauss perceived the futuristic eschatology of primitive Christianity to be a fundamental stumbling block for the modern secular mind, and he attributed this eschatology to Jesus as well, depicting him as an apocalyptic enthusiast with whom we can have little the work a distinctively contemporary case;” 4) „The radically immanent theology Strauss proposed as an alternative to biblical eschatology, and his passionate critique of transcendence in any form, caught the essence of the idealist-romantic polemic against the transcendent, separated deity from orthodoxy, although it was probably based on a misreading of Hegel's dialectic;” 5) „As an alienated theologian' Strauss is representative of the Protestant theological movement from the beginning of nineteenth century to the present, and increasingly of Catholic and Jewish religious thought as well.”<sup>28</sup>

Another essential contribution to a better understanding of Strauss' work is brought forth by Christian Herman Weisse, based his approach on reconciliation between the philosophical and religious arguments.<sup>29</sup> It is important to remind here that Strauss is at first a Hegelian. And, as Marilyn Chapin Massey showed, one of Hegel's primary objectives is to reconcile religion and philosophy. In order to eliminate one of the traditional images of philosophy and religion as being adversaries, Hegel proves that the Christian representation of the embodiment of God in Jesus and the context of philosophical concepts lead through a dialectic logic to the same truth.<sup>30</sup>

Strauss formulates a strong critique of Hegel's temptation to reject religious and philosophical opinions that do not see in Jesus the manifestation of God, in

27 Schweitzer, 68.

28 Peter C. Hodgson, *Editor's Introduction: Strauss's Theological Development from 1825 to 1840* in David Friedrich Strauss, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, Edited and with an Introduction by Peter C. Hodgson, Translated from the Fourth German Edition by George Eliot (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), xvii-xviii.

29 Commentary in Schweitzer, 121.

30 Marilyn Chapin Massey, *Introduction* in David Friedrich Strauss, *In Defense of My Life of Jesus Against the Hegelians*, Translated, edited, and with an introduction by Marilyn Chapin Massey (Connecticut: Archon Books, Hamden, 1983), xiv.

other words, of divinity in the full sense.<sup>31</sup> At the same time, Strauss draws our attention to three relevant features that characterize the Hegelian perspective on “the historical person of Jesus”: 1) The recognition of divine presence in Jesus and his life as the life of God who had been embodied and appeared in a certain moment of historical evolution, a moment that was favorable for an adequate perception of the unity of human and divine in the sensible world; 2) there is no strict correlation between particular events in the life of Jesus and their meaning in the field of the “absolute relation”; 3) regardless, the historical person of Jesus himself manifests the unity between human and divine in a way that cannot be found in another person. Strauss emphasizes one element which seems to him essential in understanding Christianity: in the context of the Hegelian thought, the absolute content of the Christian self remains incomplete; according to Strauss, this develops further only within the Christian community.<sup>32</sup> It is important to notice the relevance of this aspect of the development and the fulfillment of religious awareness through the community. Against this background we reach a better understanding of the way in which David Strauss interprets the transformations which occurred in the perception of Jesus, in the progressive development from the perception of Jesus as a historical character to the Christ of the Gospels and, finally, to the redeemer about whom the Christian churches teach.

This debate brings the historical Jesus of Nazareth and the supramundane Christ face to face. The relation is complex and emphasizes the fact that it is difficult to imagine “the long agony in which the historical view of the life of Jesus came to birth.”<sup>33</sup> The history of the relations between Jesus and Christ is complicated, and it is relevant not only to understanding the life of Jesus, but also to the history of European civilization. Understanding the history of the relations of Jesus and Christ may lead us to a better understanding of the world built on Christian values.<sup>34</sup> But the investigation of the life of Jesus is important not only historically,

31 Strauss, *In Defense of My Life of Jesus Against the Hegelians*, 21.

32 Strauss, 37.

33 Schweitzer, 60.

34 Of course there are voices that claim that European civilization is built on Judeo-Christian values. This statement is true only if by that we understand the way by which Christian civilization has confronted Judaism and tried in various ways to repress it. We must have in sight here a great variety of attitudes: the promotion of the idea of The New Israel to replace the old Israel, the expulsions, and the ambiguous attitude of Christians when European Jews were exterminated. “Judeo-Christian” is a phrase that suggests the idea of confrontation rather than the idea of living together; it expresses an unbalanced relationship between the two, which makes the dialogue difficult. Concerning some aspects of these confrontations Paula Fredriksen writes: “Jesus of Nazareth was a Jew. The crowds who heard him, his earliest disciples, the apostle Paul – all were Jews. The holy days and sacred writings of the earliest community were the festivals and Scriptures of Israel. Yet, as it grew, Christianity became a community conspicuous for not living according to Jewish law and tradition. Gentiles, not Jews, dominated the movement. As a religion, Christianity came to be defined – and, indeed, defined itself – by its hostility toward Jews and Judaism.” Paula Fredriksen, “The Birth of Christianity and the Origins of Christian Anti-Judaism” in *Jesus, Judaism, and Christian Anti-Judaism. Reading the New Testament after the Holocaust*, ed. by Paula Fredriksen and Adele

but especially as a means by which we can turn to “the Jesus of history as an ally in the struggle against the tyranny of dogma.”<sup>35</sup>

A major preoccupation of the rationalist analysis of religion in the 19th century is this deconstruction of the traditional image of Christ found in Christian dogma. Schweitzer observed that Strauss believed that he did nothing else but used an interpretation practiced at that time. He applied a specific method practiced regarding the Old Testament to the interpretation of the New Testament and to the life of Jesus: that is, the method of biblical criticism. Thus, Strauss is among the authors who do not orientate their analysis against the person of Jesus but against the excessive supernatural aura that has grown around him: “They were eager to picture Him as truly and purely human, to strip from Him the robes of splendor with which He had been appareled, and clothe Him once more with the coarse garments in which He had walked in Galilee.”<sup>36</sup>

Strauss criticizes the previous methods of interpretation and based on this criticism reaches the conclusion that a mythical explication of biblical stories is necessary. Two principles are used to support this conclusion: 1) the external testimonies are not sufficient to sustain the stories of those that have witnessed the biblical events; 2) the prophecies of the Old Testament have been applied by the authors of the New Testament to Jesus and the prophetic status with which he has been invested. Applying his method of interpretation, Strauss comes to the conclusion that: “The New Testament authors have an idea of the person and of the life of Jesus which cannot be harmonized with our concepts of human life and the laws of nature. They tell especially the supernatural about him, but we can accept only the natural in him.”<sup>37</sup> Keeping account of this contextualization of the discussion, Edwina G. Lawler argues that it was not Strauss’ intention to deny the content of faith; witness to that stands the way Strauss builds his argument. That is why in the third part of his book about Jesus, he will try to reconstruct the elements of faith he had deconstructed earlier. Even if from the point of view of Strauss’ philosophy of religions the authenticity of biblical stories cannot be sustained, they do not lose their power of suggestion and their religious value.<sup>38</sup>

Beginning here, Strauss’ exegetes notice that, unlike traditionalists who consider the biblical stories as stories about the interventions of the supernatural, and unlike rationalists who give biblical events a natural explanation, Strauss persuasively suggests a third alternative: “The miracles stories are symbolic narratives (or myths)

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Reinhartz (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 8. See also, Paula Fredriksen, *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews. A Jewish Life and the Emergence of Christianity* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999).

35 Schweitzer, 4.

36 Schweitzer, 4.

37 David Friedrich Strauss, *The Christ of Faith and the Jesus of History. A Critique of Schleiermacher’s Life of Jesus*, Translated, edited, and with an Introduction by Leander E. Keck (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1997), 159.

38 Edwina G. Lawler, *David Strauss and His Critics. The Life of Jesus Debate in Early Nineteenth-century German Journals* (New York: Peter Lang, 1986), 41-42.

that make use of language and themes drawn from the Hebrew Bible in order to speak the religious truth about Jesus. Thus, the miracles stories didn't happen. But neither are they mistaken or false accounts of something the disciples thought happened or invented for the sake of exaggerating their portrait of Jesus. Rather, the miracle stories are religiously true, even though not factually true."<sup>39</sup>

Thus Strauss is seen as an author that, due to his philosophical education, has freed himself from a series of theological obsessions of his predecessors. He is not among the authors that worried over the question of whether or not the life of Jesus as a historical character can still represent a solid foundation for religion. That is why Albert Schweitzer could state that it is not important to what extent "God-manhood" is present in Jesus' life, but rather the fact that the idea of unity between the divine and the human is alive in the consciousness of those ready to see it as a manifestation in the sensible world. Moreover, and on the other hand, the spiritual force of the unification of human and divine determines not only a changed consciousness, but also a transfiguration of the lives and actions of those who acknowledge it.<sup>40</sup>

It is interesting that these statements were made by Schweitzer in 1906. At the end of the 20th century, speaking in the same spirit, Marcus J. Borg appreciates that not only the scientifically-proven historicity of Jesus matters for Jesus' followers, but of even greater importance turns out to be the necessity of promoting a vision about Jesus that will lead to the building of new structures of social relations based on a politics of compassion, that will lead to a society where radical economic individualism is counterbalanced by principles derived from the politics of compassion. The way to accomplish this seems simple in Borg's vision: "to take seriously the two central presuppositions of the Jewish-Christian tradition. First, there is a dimension of reality beyond the visible world of our ordinary experience, a dimension charged with power, whose ultimate quality is compassion. Second, the fruits of the life lived in accord with the Spirit are to be embodied not only in individuals, but also in the life of the faithful community."<sup>41</sup>

Another possibility of interpretation is that which arises from the discussion regarding the centrality of the figure of the genius, dominant during the 19th century. To discuss the role of the genius one can evoke an emblematical story of his/her standing during that time. In the subchapter called "Genius and the New Religion," of

39 Marcus J. Borg, "The Historical Study of Jesus and Christian Origins" in *Jesus at 2000*, ed. by Marcus J. Borg (Colorado: Westview Press, Boulder, 1998), 128.

40 Schweitzer, 79-80. Schweitzer considers that "A purely historical presentation of the life of Jesus was in that first period wholly impossible; what was operative was a creative reminiscence acting under the impulse of the idea which the personality of Jesus had called to life among mankind. And this idea of God-manhood, the realisation of which in every personality is the ultimate goal of humanity, is the eternal reality in the Person of Jesus, which no criticism can destroy." Schweitzer, 80.

41 Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus A New Vision. Spirit, culture, and the Life of Discipleship* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1987), 199. See also Marcus J. Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time. The Historical Jesus & the Heart of Contemporary Faith* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994); Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship* (Valley Forge, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1994).

her book on David Strauss, Marilyn Chapin Massey tells the dramatic story of a person drawn into the cult of the genius. In 1834, the young Charlotte Stieglitz creates a great sensation in Germany due to her ritual sacrifice. Her husband was a minor poet who failed to rise to creative significance. Convinced of her husband's talent, she decides to help him. So, she kills herself to give him a profound emotion and a spiritual impetus meant to trigger in him the full creative force of his genius. As expected, the husband remained a minor poet, but she became a legend that inspired many other souls of the era.<sup>42</sup>

This story is mentioned by the author to show the force of the emblematic figure of the genius in the 19th century, which indeed Strauss associates with the figure of Jesus. Using the specific language of the era, Strauss states "that Jesus is to be regarded as a person, as a great – and as far as I am concerned, the greatest – personality in the series of religious geniuses, but still only a man like others, and that the Gospels are to be regarded as the oldest collections of the myths which were attached around the core of this personality."<sup>43</sup> The author believes that this will turn Jesus into a character that expresses the greatness of his century. Therefore we need to be cautious while reading the statements of those that see Strauss' thinking as being anti-Christian. In fact, this is a philosophical position that resorts to an extreme modality of spiritualization of Jesus as a historical character and to an unprecedented elevation of the divine in exemplary beings that is the genius. This placing yields the benefit of understanding Idel's intuition regarding Rosenzweig's interpretation of Strauss and places the latter in the field of ancient mysticism. The figure of the genius is representative for the spirit of a century, but it is also meaningful for the divinization of the human, or, more precisely, for explaining the way in which the divine element is born and fulfilled in man.

Edwina G. Lawler points out that in spite of and beyond this spiritualization, the historical element is not completely absent. Even when seen through a mystical lens, Jesus keeps his human quality, even if it is the exemplary, ideal man. Strauss is reserved in accepting the messianic dimension with which the New Testament invests Jesus, and based on the principles of speculative philosophy and historical criticism, he rejects any possibility of historically founding the dogmas of the church according to which "Jesus was the incarnate God." Strauss states that analysis from a historical perspective proves that, "the ideal of the dogmatic Christ on the one hand and the historical Jesus of Nazareth on the other are separated forever."<sup>44</sup>

42 Marilyn Chapin Massey, *Christ Unmasked. The Meaning of The life of Jesus in German Politics* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 119.

43 Strauss, *The Christ of Faith and the Jesus of History*, 161.

44 Strauss, 169. Marcus J. Borg has an opposite position from that of Strauss. From Borg's perspective, such a statement disregards an essential element that brings together the two characters. Borg singles out the existence of a founding experience of the transformation of Jesus as a Galileean into Jesus as a face of God: „By Easter, I do not mean a particular day or an experience confined to a few weeks after the death of Jesus. By Easter, I mean most centrally and simply that the followers of Jesus continued to experience

Strauss, whose vision was based upon the intellectual instruments that the philosophy of this time could offer, derives his conclusions assuming the relation between faith and historical reality. Thus, he works with the philosophical presupposition of an overlap between Jesus and the idea of God-man.<sup>45</sup>

This overlap can be compared to a similar idea found in Ernest Renan, who believes that Jesus experienced so intensely the messianic myth that he identified himself with it. Even if we do not embrace Renan's vision of Jesus, we cannot overlook the favorable light in which he casts human nature, able to discover the depths of its divinity and live in the spirit of that which is profoundly divine in each person.<sup>46</sup>

Convinced that a reconstruction of the image of Jesus according to the experience of the era is necessary, Strauss states about the image offered by the evangelists and the founders of Christianity that "our God is another, our world is another; also Christ can no longer be for us who he was for them."<sup>47</sup> But what alternative does he propose? In the spirit of his era, Strauss strives to express the essence of Christology by replacing the Christ seen as an individual, whose image is built on the basis of representation and mythical experience idea that exists only in our minds in the Kantian sense with a Christ that represents an idea that exists in reality: the idea of humanity. "Humanity is the union of the two natures – God become man, the infinite manifesting itself in the finite, and the finite spirit remembering its finitude." The whole history of Christ is for Strauss a history of the becoming of humanity: "it is Humanity that dies, rises, and ascends to heaven, for from the negation of its phenomenal life there ever proceeds a higher spiritual life; from the suppression of its mortality as a personal, national, and terrestrial spirit, arises its union with the infinite spirit of the heavens. By faith in this Christ, especially in his death and resurrection, man is justified before God; that is, by the kindling within him of the idea of Humanity, the individual man participates in the divinely human life of the species."<sup>48</sup>

Strauss' exegetes notice that according to the internal logic of his system, it is impossible for Strauss to find in the idea of the unity of the divine and the human a reality that can be fulfilled in Jesus. He was not yet ready to accept the divine-humanity as the highest idea of human thinking "actually realized in the historic personality of Jesus" but prefers to sustain the thesis that this idea is fully realized

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him as a living reality after his death, but in a radically new way. Namely, they experienced him as being a spiritual, nonmaterial reality, and, increasingly in the years and decades after his death, as having the qualities of God," writes Marcus Borg in Marcus J. Borg, "From Galilean Jew to the Face of God: The Pre-Easter and Post-Easter Jesus" in *Jesus at 2000*, ed. by Marcus J. Borg, 13.

45 Edwina G. Lawler, *David Strauss and His Critics*, 45.

46 Ernest Renan, *The Life of Jesus*, Introduction by John Haynes Homes, (New York: The Modern Library, 1955).

47 Strauss, *The Christ of Faith and the Jesus of History*, 162.

48 Strauss, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, 780.

as the becoming of humanity<sup>49</sup> through a dialectical process reminiscent of Hegel, even though the path is different from Hegel's. The idea of the God-man of the absolute religions is adopted here to emphasize the historical dimension of the New Testament as well as to shed a new spiritual light on the historical nature of Jesus. "The image of man without sin, of the soul at one with God, is the ideal of humanity which has its origin in human nature and its ethical-religious foundation, which develops, refines, and enriches itself with it. The ideal of humanity was refined and enriched especially through Jesus, but it also underwent further development after him and will continue to do so," writes Strauss.<sup>50</sup>

In *The Life of Jesus*, Strauss wants to see if the New Testament expresses a historical reality. His conclusion is that a great many of the biblical stories do not have historical value but rather a mythical one, they are "unconscious poetic creations of the earliest Christians, who shaped stories about Jesus to express their belief in him as the messiah promised to Israel."<sup>51</sup>

One discovers beyond Strauss' humanist vision, a natural preoccupation with Christianity and with the nature of religious experience. Thus arises the question: how does this criticism affect the image of Christ as the son of God and the relation of Christians to Him?

Marilyn Chapin Massey finds an answer at the end of the book "The Life of Jesus," where Strauss offers his own answer which shows that recognition of the presence of mythological structures does not thwart Christian faith, but rather provokes it to a new state of development. The realization that the Jesus of the 1st century is not identical to the Christ of the Christian faith leads to the discovery of Christ's true identity. "Christians have always struggled to understand the Christ of faith, how he is truly God and truly man, one person with two natures. The Life of Jesus ends the struggle. By dissociating Christ from the single human Jesus, it frees Christians to see that the true identity of Christ is the Hegelian idea of the human species."<sup>52</sup> A contemporary answer to this problem is given by Marcus J. Borg: "Knowledge of historical Jesus is not essential. Being a Christian does not require having accurate historical information. Generations of Christians, taking the gospel portraits at 'face value' as historical accounts, have had incorrect historical beliefs about Jesus without harm to their faith or piety. Christianity does not consist primarily of having correct beliefs about the historical Jesus, but consists of having a relationship with the living Christ."<sup>53</sup>

49 Schweitzer, 79; Edwina G. Lawler, *David Strauss and His Critics*, 42.

50 Strauss, *The Christ of Faith and the Jesus of History*, 166.

51 Marilyn Chapin Massey, *Introduction* in David Friedrich Strauss, *In Defense of My Life of Jesus Against the Hegelians*, x.

52 Marilyn Chapin Massey, *Introduction*, p. xi.

53 Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus A New Vision. Spirit, culture, and the Life of Discipleship*, 13.

Thus, from the Christian point of view, the discussion about Jesus as a historical character seems superfluous. Today, it can no longer bring about something new in understanding Christianity, because of the dogmas formulated by the church regarding the unity of the human and the divine in the person of Jesus Christ. The discussion does not seem to offer any new solutions in so far as Judaism is concerned; neither does the analysis regarding Jesus as a historical character yield an increase of knowledge in studies of Jewish tradition. Rosenzweig has given a decisive solution in this sense, placing The-Life-of-Jesus-Theology in the perimeter of the ancient mysticism, where Strauss' thinking receives the formulation of an atheist theology. It is obvious that for Rosenzweig the atheist theology, incapable of offering an authentic solution for the relation between the human and the divine, is not anti-theist. From the point of view of our theme, the relation between Judaism and Christianity, I believe that according to Rosenzweig, Jesus as a historical character cannot bring anything meaningful as a basis of the dialogue between the two religions.

In this sense Rosenzweig's motive in writing *Atheistic Theology* is meaningful. Developing the perspective offered by Idel, Rivka Horwitz shows that "it was written in an attempt to replace the atheistic theory of the great and popular Martin Buber. *Atheistic theology* builds a myth around the life of Jesus, as one can see in the work of David Friedrich Strauss, or around the life of the Jewish people, as was done by Buber. Rosenzweig develops an alternative theory to that of Buber and Strauss. He considers their thoughts to be founded on ancient pagan myth that does not reach the absolute God. Rosenzweig instead uses Jewish mysticism for the structure of his philosophy."<sup>54</sup>

## Reading Rosenzweig through the Lens of Moshe Idel

Moshe Idel has developed an original perspective on Rosenzweig. He tries to distance himself from the traditional patterns of interpretation by emphasizing the mystical aspects of Rosenzweig works. The novelty of this approach was well argued by Warren Zev Harvey who considers that Moshe Idel made "the first serious attempts to assess the relationship of Rosenzweig to the Kabbalah"<sup>55</sup>. Later, Rivka

<sup>54</sup> Horwitz, 33.

<sup>55</sup> Warren Ze'ev Harvey, "How Much Kabbalah in The Star of Redemption?," *Immanuel*, 21 (1987), 129. In his response to the paper presented by Moshe Idel in 1980, Harvey wrote: "Students of Rosenzweig's theology have as a rule downplayed, ignore, or denied outright its relationship to Jewish mystical tradition ... This reticence has surely been encouraged by several anti-mystical remarks of Rosenzweig's, but these are far less in number than his anti-philosophical remarks, and no one would think of denying that Rosenzweig was influenced by the philosophic tradition. Harvey, 128.

Horwitz notes that “around 1980 Idel, one of the most important young Kabbalah scholars, discovered parallels between Kabbalah and Rosenzweig.”<sup>56</sup>

The problem of the significant influence of Kabbalah on Rosenzweig invites a number of clarifications. Idel’s interpretation remains an open issue despite his very convincing arguments. It is significant that during his discussion with Gershom Scholem upon this theme, Scholem discourages Idel from further research on this line of interpretation because he does not believe in the positive value of Rosenzweig’s relation with Kabbalah. In spite of this, “Idel brilliantly analyzes the article *Atheistic Theology* and ‘The Germ Cell’ as they led to Rosenzweig’s thought in *The Star of Redemption*. He also develops the idea of theomorphism, an interpretation that has parallels in Kabbalah, and presents Rosenzweig’s theory of language.”<sup>57</sup>

Idel’s analysis starts from *Atheistic Theology*, the first text written by Rosenzweig after his decision to abandon the idea of converting to Christianity. From the perspective of this text, it is important to point out that Idel’s analysis is based on the observation that Rosenzweig’s attempt to reconstruct Judaism comes as a reaction to a certain way of thinking developed within the Christian theology. Idel believes that Rosenzweig’s statements concerning *atheistic theology* are important not only for a better understanding of the work of David Strauss, but also for the understanding his own approach to theology. He wants to answer the question of whether we can see Rosenzweig’s theology, which posits an intimate relation between man and God, as being at the same time influenced by an ancient mysticism that Rosenzweig suggests as an alternative to atheistic theology.<sup>58</sup> Idel affirms the existence of a mysticism in which the relationship between man and God is confirmed by God himself: “Rosenzweig hereby offers a theistic perspective that assumes the existence of a transcendent, revealing God. Not insignificantly Rosenzweig claims that the maxim illustrating this theological presupposition is that of a kabbalist.”<sup>59</sup>

56 Horwitz, 32.

57 Horwitz, 33. “Theomorphism is the theory of language that Rosenzweig develops in his writings. Idel told me that this theory impressed him deeply and was even the catalyst that brought him to study Kabbalah in Rosenzweig’s work. This theological linguistic theory of Rosenzweig’s appears daring in its opposition to the rational Spinozistic Hegelian approach that was accepted in Rosenzweig’s time. Whereas Spinoza is the peak of rationalism and rejects biblical anthropomorphism, Rosenzweig supports it, calling his theory theomorphism. God does not speak in the language of the human, but the human speaks in the language of the divine (see below). When language originates in God it is most real. Rosenzweig rejects the rationalist claim that the Torah speaks in human language but shares the Kabbalists’ claim that the human being speaks in God’s language. For Rosenzweig this theory is central in his interpretation of the dialogue”, writes Rivka Horwitz, 42.

58 Franz Rosenzweig, “Atheistic Theology” in Franz Rosenzweig, *Philosophical and Theological Writings*, Translated and Edited with Notes and Commentary, by Paul W. Franks and Michael L. Morgan (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2000), 15.

59 Idel, „Franz Rosenzweig and Kabbalah”, 163. Idel’s starting point is that: „the opinion expressed by Rosenzweig is important: One may contrast the ancient mysticism from which atheistic theology draws its inspiration, with another form of ancient mysticism - namely Kabbalah - from which insight may be obtained for the understanding of the theology Rosenzweig sought to construct”. Idel, 163.

However, Rosenzweig's interest in Jewish mysticism is not limited to this single article. Moshe Idel shows that resemblances can be established between Rosenzweig's statements in *Atheistic Theology* and statements in *Star of Redemption*. Thus, in the first work he notices that one of the Kabbalah masters affirms: "God speaks: if you do not bear witness to me, then I am not."<sup>60</sup> This interconditioning between the divine and the human is also found in *The Star of Redemption*: "If you testify to me, then I am God, and not otherwise - thus the master of the Kabbalah lets God of love declare."<sup>61</sup> We could easily conclude that Rosenzweig expresses a relationship similar to that which animates Strauss's formulation of his theory of ancient mysticism. A detailed analysis made by Idel enables him to show that Rosenzweig introduces a very important distinction: "the divine is not born in the soul, it is only renewed in the soul."<sup>62</sup> We find here the expression of Rosenzweig's departure from *Atheistic Theology*. The great problem with which this theology confronts us, is the fact that it relativizes or even eliminates the distinction between human and divine. This causes difficulties in understanding the religious experience. For Rosenzweig the distinction between divine and human is essential to understanding the complexities of religious life.<sup>63</sup> While criticizing the 'spirituality' of some Jewish philosophers,<sup>64</sup> he is positive about a philosophy that deals with the dichotomy between an ideal meta-historical Judaism and its historical expression. This distinction is not only a game of theological ideas. It is a distinction that is vital for Judaism because in its ultimate stratum of meaning it expresses the distinction between God and the people of Israel.

Moreover, this distinction between what is divine and what is human expresses itself in the terms of Israel's vocation of reflecting in the immanence of life the unity of divine transcendence. Idel is convinced that the mystical resources that are used by *atheistic theology* lead Rosenzweig to find the resources for a reconstruction of Judaism beginning with another form of ancient mysticism. His analyses reveal the fact that the three basic concepts of creation, revelation, and redemption, are formulated by Rosenzweig under the influence of Kabbalah. Based on the *atheistic theology*, he introduces a radical turnover: without giving up the mythical foundation, Rosenzweig, according to Idel, "instead of anchoring the myth in the

60 Idel, "Franz Rosenzweig and Kabbalah", 163; See Rosenzweig "Atheistic Theology", 23.

61 Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, 171.

62 Idel, "Franz Rosenzweig and Kabbalah", 163.

63 Idel, 163.

64 See Franz Rosenzweig, *Philosophical and Theological Writings*, 10, note 1. Rivka Horwitz, "From Hegelianism to a Revolutionary Understanding of Judaism: Franz Rosenzweig's Attitude Toward Kabbalah and Myth", *Modern Judaism*, 26, 1 (2006), 31-54. See also Rivka Horwitz, *Buber's Way to "I and Thou": The Development of Martin Buber's Thought and His "Religion as Presence" Lectures* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1988).

changing flow of life he anchors it, following the kabbalistic mythology, in the life of God Himself, giving it an absolute speculative character.”<sup>65</sup>

Idel's argumentation is substantiated by other authors, as well. Thus, Warren Zev Harvey stated that “Idel has demonstrated that there was a meaningful Kabbalistic influence on Rosenzweig.”<sup>66</sup> In turn, Rivka Horwitz reveals the fact that Rosenzweig builds his vision on kabalistic myths, the Talmud, Midrash, and prayer. Furthermore, based on the well-known triadic structures of God-man-world and creation-revelation-redemption and an entry in Rosenzweig's diary (June 30, 1922), Horwitz uncovers the fact that when the former talks about God, man, and world, he sees them as being a kabalistic structure. This hints at the fact that such abstract structures as Ein Sof, the Yes and the No, could be associated with God, man, and world, and suggests a perspective in which kabbalistic elements are important.<sup>67</sup>

In his effort to demonstrate the profoundly Kabbalistic structure of Rosenzweig's thinking Moshe Idel focuses on four issues. The first of these is the fact that Rosenzweig's theory of creation was inspired by a Kabbalistic perspective. To understand the explicit way in which Rosenzweig relates to Jewish mysticism, it is enough to remember the fragment: “Jewish mysticism bridges the gap between the ‘God of our fathers’ and the ‘law’ in a manner all its own. It replaces the general concept of creation with that of the mysterious creations, the ‘tale of the chariot’ as it is called in an allusion to the vision of Ezekiel.”<sup>68</sup> We notice here the fact that Idel has the right to sustain the existence of a special connection between the story of the chariot and the story of creation, a relation that was suggested to Rosenzweig by the mystical literature. At the same time, it is useful to remember that Rivka Horwitz points out the fact that Rosenzweig's interpretation of creation as being based upon the Kabbalah surfaces only in 1917 in a letter to Rudi Ehrenberg called “The Germ Cell of the Star of Redemption.”<sup>69</sup>

A second issue related to the mystical thought underlined by Idel is the way in which Rosenzweig formulates the doctrine of revelation. He turns to

65 Idel, „Franz Rosenzweig and Kabbalah”, 168. Moshe Idel considers that we can depict also an influence from the christian mysticism. He cites a fragment from Pico della Mirandola that says: “Just as the true astrology teaches to read in the book of God, so the Kabbalah teaches to read in the book of the law”. These words seem to Idel similar to those in The Star of Redemption, in which Franz Rosenzweig writes: “For the Jew, the book of the law can thus, as it were, replace the book of nature or even the starry heavens from which the men of yore once thought they could interpret terrestrial matters by intelligent omnes”. Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, Translated from the 2d ed. of 1930 by William W. Hallo (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970), 409. This comparison between the astrologist who reads the book of the sky and the cabbalist that reads the book of law reminds Idel of Mirandola. The similes are obvious. Even so, the influence of Christian mysticism is more likely a secondary one. They show the fact that Rosenzweig was familiar with this type of mysticism, more than the fact that they constitute elements that influence the philosopher's way of thinking.

66 Harvey, 134.

67 Horwitz, 40. Also, Harvey mentioned that “the Kabbalah influenced Rosenzweig's approach in all three of his primal relational concepts”. Harvey, 130.

68 Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, 408.

69 Horwitz, 37.

the Kabbalistic image represented by the Shekhina and points out a relevant fragment in which Rosenzweig states: "Mysticism bridges the gap between the 'God of our fathers' and the 'Remnant of Israel' with the doctrine of the Shekhina. The Shekhina, God's descent upon man and his sojourn among men, is pictured as a dichotomy taking place in God himself...The idea of the wanderings of the Shekhina, of the sparks of the original divine light being scattered about the world, this casts all of revelation between the Jewish God and Jewish Man, and thereby anchors both, God as well as the remnant, in all the depth of revelation."<sup>70</sup> The move of Sekhina into exile opens the door to revelation. This fact leads Idel to affirm that the philosopher's choice for terms taken from the Lurianic Cabala is not accidental. Despite the critical attitude that Rosenzweig has towards mysticism, he values in a positive way the essential elements of kabalistic mysticism. In this way, the exile is viewed as a path towards revelation and is connected with the idea of redemption.<sup>71</sup>

The third level of Idel's discussion of Rosenzweig is oriented toward the problem of redemption. The view of redemption seems to have numerous kabalistic elements. We can grasp here the strong correlation that exists between "God of our fathers," "law," and "the Remnant of Israel." This correlation is seen by Idel as a way in which the idea of unifying the whole existence in God through the process of redemption is transferred from the domain of the dogma to that of morality. The emphasis is on the dimension of reciprocity. Jewish thinkers cannot conceive of a separation between morality and God's truth. That is why this unification can be seen as love, in virtue of a Jewish tradition in which the assumption of law and love is a unique reality.<sup>72</sup>

Idel notices that, although in the *Atheistic Theology* Rosenzweig does not give details concerning the nature of the union between the human and the divine and the entire creation in God (that is, *redemption*), in *The Star of Redemption* the kabbalistic idea has an important meaning and is explicitly expressed: "for the sake of uniting the holy God and his Shekina."<sup>73</sup> This unification is based on the

70 Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, 409-410.

71 Idel, „Franz Rosenzweig and Kabbalah“, 66. Warren Zev Harvey pay attention to a point that was not mentioned by Idel: "Professor Ernst Simon has called attention to a similarity between certain Kabbalistic view of Revelation and Rosenzweig's statement in a letter to Buber in 1925 that 'The only immediate content of Revelation ... is Revelation itself'". Harvey, 132.

72 Idel, „Franz Rosenzweig and Kabbalah“, 164. In her turn, Rivka Horwitz writes: „In the central book of *The Star of Redemption*, the interpretation of the Song of Songs is presented. It is seen as a dialogue between the lover and the beloved, the king and the shepherd, the bride and the bridegroom, an expression of the love between the human and God. The human being is the bride, and God is the unfaithful bridegroom. The very special Jewish interpretation of the divine love is in the end of *The Star*. The love is not only the secret biblical story of the Song of Songs, the love between the human soul and the divine, but the love of the entire Jewish people, "the Remnant of Israel," and "the God of our Fathers."": Horwitz, 37.

73 In *The Star of Redemption* Rosenzweig writes: „The Jew, however, fulfills the endless customs and precepts „for the sake of uniting the holy God and his Shekina.” With this formula, the individual, the remnant, prepares his heart, „in awe and love”, to fulfill, „in the name of all Israel” whatever commandment is at the

continuous assembling of the divine sparks spread throughout the whole creation. Through his authentic experience, the Jew must participate in the realization of this reunification that will be fulfilled only at the end of the times. Idel's conclusion concerning this eschatological perspective is obvious: "What we have here is clearly a version of Lurianic Kabbalah, which places the idea of tikkun at the center of Jewish religious experience and makes the keeping of the commandments the key to achieving the unity of God."<sup>74</sup>

A fourth element correlated with kabalistic thought is the way in which Rosenzweig relocates anthropomorphism. One of the most important things revealed by Idel is the fact that Rosenzweig finds himself, within the context of his era, well posited to offer a solution that lies somewhere between Philo's spiritualized God and "the complete humanization of God found in Christianity," solution suggested by the Kabbalah.<sup>75</sup>

In spite of the seemingly negative aspects supplied, Moshe Idel observes that Rosenzweig believed that the superabundance of interpretation practiced by the Kabbalah is preferable, even from a religious perspective, to the negative effects of the absence of imagery which faced Judaism during the emancipation of the Jews. The traditional rejection of anthropomorphism and of representation in the Jewish mentality is considered here to be one of the motivations that determined, during the 19th and the 20th century, a sort of fascination and an attraction of Jews towards Christian anthropomorphism, which in some cases even ended with the conversion of Jews to Christianity. That is why the assumption that Rosenzweig uses Kabbalah to offer an alternative to Christianity is plausible. I believe that Idel has the right to affirm that the excess of spiritualization in Judaism that lead some Jews to depart from Judaism and join Christianity, is balanced by Rosenzweig through his demand for abundant anthropomorphism inspired by Jewish mysticism.<sup>76</sup>

It is obvious that the acceptance of such a representation does not establish the connection between the Christian and Jewish mentalities: the acceptance of the idea of representation and the revealing the importance of representation in Kabbalah, should not be seen as being the same as the anthropomorphic representation of divinity in Christianity. Rosenzweig is not fascinated by the image of God embodied in a human Jesus. The representation Rosenzweig seeks in the Kabbalah is not meant to

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moment incumbent on him. He will gather the glory of God, dispersed all over the world in countless sparks, out of the dispersion and one day bring it back home to Him who has been stripped of his glory. Every one of his deeds, every fulfilling of a commandment, achieves a portion of this reunion. To confess God's unity - the Jew calls it: to unify God." Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, 410-411.

74 Idel, „Franz Rosenzweig and Kabbalah”, 165.

75 Idel, 170.

76 Idel, 171. On anthropomorphism see Franz Rosenzweig, *God, Man, and the World. Lectures and Essays*, Edited and Translated from the German by Barbara E. Galli, With a Foreword by Michael Oppenheim (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1998).

directly connect Judaism with the God-Man representation of Christianity, but rather to offer an alternative to this. Thus, it becomes obvious that through "comparative" effort, Rosenzweig puts Judaism next to Christianity mainly with the purpose of finding a consistent element of comparison through which he could underline the special value of Judaism.

However, the question naturally arises, how far does Rosenzweig's acceptance of representation and anthropomorphism go? With an excellent intuition of the text, Idel reveals the fact that anthropomorphism is important because it gives the theologian the privilege of observing the realization of an encounter. Anthropomorphism becomes acceptable if it does not refer to the essence of divinity, but rather speaks of a particular way that makes an encounter between man and God possible. The answer given by Idel leads to the conclusion that: "This distinction between the revealed side of God, which can be described in anthropomorphic terms, and the hidden side, which transcends all description, has a certain parallel in Kabbalah, where the anthropomorphic descriptions of the revealed God are seen in the form of the Ten Sefiroth or of the Adam Kadmon."<sup>77</sup>

This anthropomorphism appears as a reversed one. God is represented not as a reflection of what is human in the mysterious mirror of the divine, but as a confirmation of the fact that what is human has a divine origin. God is the archetype of all possible representations. He does not appear as a human representation extrapolated on a divine level, as we can find in 19th century thinkers and as we can partially depict from the perspective of a birth of the divine in man found in the writings of David F. Strauss. Thus, the reconstruction in a mystical perspective of Judaism can be associated again in Rosenzweig with an alternative to the Christian thought of Strauss.

Taking all these points into consideration, Idel clearly affirms that for Rosenzweig the acceptance of anthropomorphism does not mean an acceptance of personification; but on the contrary, he refuses a representation of God that begins with a human being (although the concern for the understanding of Kabbalah can be seen as an attempt to emphasize elements in Judaism that are similar to those that had drawn it towards Christianity).<sup>78</sup>

## The departure from Christianity

Rosenzweig is not just a thinker who simply tells us that Judaism and Christianity are both true religions, he reveals more than that: his statements must be viewed from the political and religious perspective of his times, as well as from the perspective of some personal experiences of his. On the one hand, he makes

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<sup>77</sup> Idel, 170.

<sup>78</sup> Idel, 169.

this statement in a political context in which anti-Semitism becomes stronger and acquires new dimensions

On the other hand, Rosenzweig's vision is set in a religious context in which Christian theology affirms that Judaism is something old and obsolete and that its entire legacy was transferred to Christianity. As Bernard Martin put it: "Rosenzweig clearly hoped that this view would lead to abandonment on the part of the Church of missionary activities directed toward Jews"<sup>79</sup>.

Last but not least, we have to take into consideration the fact that we cannot separate Rosenzweig's favorable perspective on Christianity from his personal experience and from his journey towards the Christian church, no matter the reasons behind this gesture. It is as important as his decision of remaining a Jew.

Rosenzweig's radical point of view appears in this context. We are not exaggerating in saying that this valorization of Judaism and Christianity is in fact a "No" addressed to Christianity or more precisely to its tendency to confiscate the entire heritage of Israel. The placing of Judaism and Christianity on the same level must be viewed as a reparatory gesture towards Judaism, as a gesture of regaining the dignity of Judaism in connection with Christianity. This is the profound meaning of Rosenzweig's statements that sustain the truth of Christianity and Judaism and of the fact that Judaism and Christianity are both eternal.

One of the metaphors used by Rosenzweig to reveal the relation between Judaism and Christianity is that of the archaic symbolism represented by the Star of David, *Maghen David*. The symbolism of the star reveals a relation in which Judaism and Christianity are represented as the living fire that burns in the middle as well as the rays that are spread towards the exterior. "The life of this people, alone, burns with a fire that feeds on itself, and hence needs no sword to supply the flame with fuel from the forests of the world. The fire burns through and in itself, and sends forth rays which shine out into the world and illumine it; the fire is not aware of the rays, nor does it have need of their light for itself. It burns silently and eternally"<sup>80</sup>, says Rosenzweig.

Thus, there is no dependency between Judaism and Christianity. More over, we find here a significant observation in the context in which he talks about "The Eternity of the Promise", Rosenzweig uses the phrase "Only the eternal people", words through which the authentic vocation, the special mission of the people of Israel is differentiated. As a result, the philosopher writes: "Only the eternal people, which is not encompassed by world history, can – at every moment – bind creation as a whole to redemption while redemption is still to come."<sup>81</sup>

79 Bernard Martin, *Great Twentieth Century Jewish Philosophers. Shestov, Rosenzweig, Buber. With selections from Their Writings* (London: The Macmillan Company, 1970), 156.

80 Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, 335.

81 Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, 335.

One of Rosenzweig's reasons not to embrace ultimately motives concerning his separation from Christianity is the fact that "Christianity recognized the God of Judaism, not as God, but as the "Father of Jesus Christ". It embraces the "Lord", but only because it knows that he alone is the way to the Father".<sup>82</sup> Or, as we have seen, Rosenzweig thinks that the participation in the life of the community of Israel leads to the closest and most direct relationship with God.

The Jewish religious life does not need any structures of mediation. Even when it is about the two religions, Rosenzweig states that his reunion with Christianity is fulfilled in a different way than the one obtained through Christ. His perspective concerning Christ is a humanist one that recuperates his image under the sign of fraternity and compassion: "Thus Christ is a friend to the man, a spiritual bridegroom to the woman, a holy infant to the child. Tied to the historical Jesus, Christ may forego this identification with the familiar figure of the neighbor, the object of brotherly love; but there the saints substitute for Christ himself".<sup>83</sup>

Although no other theologian or Jewish philosopher until Rosenzweig has proven a greater acceptance towards Christianity, he still raises two objections to Christianity. One of them has been revealed by Bernhard Casper who shows that Rosenzweig reacts to the Christian phenomenon of spiritualization of the divine, that he perceives as being exaggerated, in a process in which he leaves no place for a difference between Jesus, the son of man, and the returning Messiah.<sup>84</sup>

A second objection concerns the reaction to the tendency to anthropomorphize divinity. The critique of Christian spiritualism and personalization suggests that Rosenzweig associates Christianity with the forms of an archaic mysticism that is alien to monotheism, and which does not take into consideration the necessity of an adequate connection between what is human and what is divine. From Rosenzweig's point of view, by acting in the sphere of the Church, the Christian reaches an extreme spiritualization of God. Because of the fact that it is a community of belief, the Christian community, in its religious practices, lets itself absorbed entirely by the element of the belief in Christ (what counts for it is faith and only faith), forgetting about the existence of Christ's historical figure. Perceiving Christ through the filter of faith leads to a pious attitude of unseen spiritualization. The church is, in the philosopher's opinion, incapable to promote a religious life that brings together Jesus and Christ.

Rosenzweig considers that to this spiritualism is added a radical personalization of divinity, which does not take into consideration the distinction between man and God. This derives from the fact that in Christianity there is always a human mediator who is projected in the divinity. In the logic of Rosenzweig's thinking

82 Rosenzweig, "Selections from the Letters", 170.

83 Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, 345.

84 Bernhard Casper, *Introduction to Franz Rosenzweig*, "Selections from the Letters", 164.

this is a confusion of the divine reality and its representation connected to the mentality of the old mysticism unknown to Judaism. This spiritualization has negative consequences for religious experience and for the understanding of the coherence that accompanies the process of knowledge.

Thus, Rosenzweig considers that a good understanding of the connections between God-Man-World and Creation-Revelation-Redemption can be corrupted by three dangers, that he names “the Christian dangers”: “That the Spirit leads onto all ways, and not God; that the Son of man be the truth, and not God; that God would become All-in-All and not One above all ... Thus they are dangers which Christianity never overcomes – spiritualization of God, apotheosis of man, pantheification of the world”<sup>85</sup>

Rosenzweig focuses his critique on Christian spirituality and on the tendency of some Jewish thinkers to use a Christian way of thinking and to apply it to the Jewish reality. Although he grants an equal dignity to Judaism and to Christianity, Rosenzweig pays attention also to the differences between the two. We saw that his exegetes have shown that the critique is in fact addressed to Martin Buber and to his way of interpreting Judaism. The fact that the text from the *Atheistic Theology* “was originally written for a yearbook, *Vom Judentum* (On Judaism), at Buber’s invitation but was rejected as inappropriate because of its implicit criticism of Buber”<sup>86</sup> is of importance in this context. We should briefly remember also that Levinas too speaks about the derogative spiritualism of the relation between “I” and “Thou” in Buber. As it has happened in other situations, the fact that Rosenzweig influenced Levinas in establishing these opinions cannot be overlooked.

In this context, we can see that Rosenzweig is preoccupied by liberal theology, by the Life of Jesus theology, by the human life of Jesus, by the way in which *religion about Jesus* is replaced specifically by the *religion of Jesus* to emphasize a phenomenon that takes place in the Christian theology and is adopted with certain modifications by the Jewish thought. He is interested in this case in Christianity precisely in order to reveal the fact that under the influence of a cultural and Christian theological trend in Judaism, it becomes impossible to think the balance between what is human and what is divine in a specific religious relationship. Rosenzweig tries to avoid a Christian way of reading Judaism or the use of a Christian ideology in order to explain a Jewish reality.<sup>87</sup> For this, he regains,

85 Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, 402.

86 Paul W. Franks and Michael L. Morgan in Franz Rosenzweig, *Philosophical and Theological Writings*, 10. On relationship between Christianity and Judaism in Martin Buber’s philosophy see Lulia Grad, “Two Paradigms of Faith. Martin Buber on Christianity and Judaism”, *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, 17 (Summer 2007), 34-46.

87 Rosenzweig, *Philosophical and Theological Writings*, 16.

in a philosophical way, the theological and anthropomorphic structures borrowed from the cabbala.

Rosenzweig's theological, political and personal experience is not used by the author to justify the existence of a covenant for Jews and another one for Christians. He is preoccupied to find a Jewish identity, to resolve the spiritual crisis of secular Jews or of those tempted by Christianity. The central focus of his work is "that of Jewish authenticity in the face of modern secularity"<sup>88</sup>

As an answer to the challenges of his time, Rosenzweig introduces us through his philosophy to a profoundly religious world. This fact has been revealed by Eugen Rosenstock-Huussy when he affirms that the great merit of his correspondence with Rosenzweig is that it demonstrates the fact that a Jew and a Christian have put aside their divergences and have fought together against the humanist relativism very present in the academic background of those times.<sup>89</sup> In his turn, Emmanuel Levinas underlines the religious and philosophical value of Rosenzweig's thought affirming that *The Star of Redemption* "puts us right in the middle of a thought that carries a philosophical signification going well beyond the one it obviously has for theology and religious philosophy, this at a time when the death of God is being ceaselessly spoken about, a death which is that of the God of the Judeo-Christian tradition"<sup>90</sup>

Some say that if we analyse various aspects of his work, especially those that transform Rosenzweig into a visionary, or the ones related with our theme concerning the complementary relation between Judaism and Christianity, one might conclude that "Rosenzweig's philosophical and theological contribution was forever buried in the rubble of Nazism". With all of these, as it becomes clear from Steven T. Katz and the analyses of other authors, Rosenzweig invites us to this very day, to a renewed lecture and reflection upon his work, which is practically a never-ending source of meanings insofar as Judaism and the western civilization are concerned. We can conclude by saying, together with Steven T. Katz, that "his creative genius for subjecting the consensus position to vigorous interrogation, his passion for truth, his philosophical probity and existential integrity, his recognition and reclamation of elements of the Jewish tradition rejected by modernity for its own reasons, his unwillingness to settle for things in time when he could reach for eternity, are programmatic and existential lessons to us still."<sup>91</sup>

88 Katz, *Jewish Philosophers*, 190.

89 Rosenstock-Huussy, 71.

90 Emmanuel Levinas, Preface to Stephane Moses, *System and Revelation. The Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig*, Foreword by Emmanuel Levinas, translated by Catherine Tihanyi (Detroit: Wayne University Press, 1992), 18.

91 Steven T. Katz, "On Historicism and Eternity: Reflections on the 100th Birthday of Franz Rosenzweig" in Steven T. Katz, *Historicism, The Holocaust, and Zionism. Critical Studies in Modern Jewish Thought and History* (New York: New York University Press, 1992), 22-23.

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PHILIP WEXLER

## Mystical Jewish Sociology

### **Abstract:**

The paper begins by engaging Mircea Eliade's undervaluation of the importance of classical sociology of religion, namely, Durkheim and Weber, and goes on to show how much they share with him, particularly with regard to a critique of modern European civilization, and of the foundational importance of religion in society. This "other", non-positivist, non-reductionist face of Durkheim and Weber is elaborated by showing their religious, even "primordial" approaches to the religious bases of society and culture. Eliade's criticism of sociology is further misplaced, given the decline of the sociological regime of knowledge, and the accuracy of Eliade's prescient expectation of a cosmic rather than historical orientation, and the current importance of religion and "spirituality" for socio-cultural life, generally. The displacement of secular social theory by social and psychological understanding explicitly based in religious thought is explored in several domains and religious traditions. The paper emphasizes, however, a sociology created from within the streams of Jewish mysticism, and examples are offered. The line of Romanian scholars of religion, including Eliade, Idel and Culiano, is seen as less than apparently dissonant with both the sociology of religious experience, and the post-sociological turn to creating social theory from within religious, and particularly, mystical traditions.

## Introduction

For a sociologist, and especially for one with a religious interest such as myself, it is always a challenge to write about the work of scholars in religious studies - like Mircea Eliade, Moshe Idel, and Ioan Petru Culianu. The problem is that, no matter how interesting these authors may sound, they were sometimes distrustful of sociologists, and their perceived tendency to reductionism and to a denial of the phenomenology of religious experience.

Eliade makes no bones about his distaste for sociologists working on religious questions, even while endorsing a scholarly pluralism, which Idel (2005)

elaborates and modifies, as a perspectivism, in religious and Jewish studies, particularly.

The confusion, writes Eliade (1969;19), starts when *only* one aspect of religious life is accepted as primary and meaningful, and other aspects or functions are regarded as secondary or even illusory. Such a reductionist method was applied by Durkheim and other sociologists of religion.

Indeed, Durkheim's chef d'oeuvre is not even worthy of membership in the suspect category of sociology of religion. Eliade (1969; 15) observes: "Though Durkheim identified religion with society, *Les Formes Elementaires* does not, properly speaking, represent a contribution to the sociology of religion."

Max Weber is mentioned as "parallel to Durkheim's influence, but limited at the beginning to Germany..." with only a later deferred influence elsewhere, though the substance of his work is not described in this context, where Eliade analyzes "sociological approaches to religion."

At the same time, Eliade himself (1960) offers many sociological insights about religion, not the least of which is to suggest that the cultural specificity of the contemporary European "passion" for "historiography," for an historical, non-religious consciousness which privileges history over being and embraces nihilism, rather than a "new humanism." The road to renewal and the transcendence of historicist nihilism is through a scholarly-based, experiential awareness that the hegemony of this European culture is itself historical, and that its passion is passing, in favor of a broader, more primordial "otherness" that heralds a profound cultural and social transformation.

European values, observes Eliade (1960; 232) will lose their privileged status as universally recognized norms: they will be back at the status of local spiritual creations; that is, of cultural tributaries of a certain historic amplitude, conditioned by clearly circumscribed traditions.

Moreover, and perhaps even more radically, Eliade suggests that the end of the non-sacred historiographic culture of European nihilism, which is, in Durkheimian language, a "social fact," has further implications for the terms of intellectual problem formation, for knowledge itself. The re-appearance of exotic others, and the encounter of the "Western consciousness" with such difference (1960; 10) "... may even lead to a renewal of the problematics of philosophy, just as the discovery of exotic and primitive arts half a century ago opened up new perspectives to the European world of art."

A socio-cultural change induces a reformulation in the basic assumptions of knowledge, moving, against the grain of historical secularism, toward a re-sacralization, a return to religious symbolism and to the cosmic, which, even beyond the cultural and paradigmatic change, means also a change in life, and a resurgence of being (Eliade,1960; 244). "But there is something more: there is this

strange and reassuring fact that the change of spiritual perspective takes effect as a profound regeneration of our intimate being.”

Eliade was mistaken, however, I think, to give such short shrift to the sociology of religion giants, Durkheim and Weber. They represented in their own work the very conflict - the antinomy between the Western, European consciousness of history, secularity and naive social science on the one hand, and on the other, the quest for the archaic, for the other, and for transcendently inspired meaningful, religious experiences of being - which he articulated.

Eliade was right, I think, to herald the deep cultural change toward the cosmic, as well as to signal its implications for the more formalized aspects of culture, in philosophy and art. He need not have troubled to dismiss these sociologists so readily, however, since the culturally emergent re-sacralization, the primordial, the other, the transcendental, has surfaced even further since the time in which he wrote, and in which it was also an incipient, ambivalent theme in the foundational sociologies of religion of Durkheim and Weber.

In sum, sociology of religion has something to say about religious experience, but the practical, collective return to the experience of cosmic being has also brought with it the end of the sociological regime of knowledge. The question that now emerges is not whether it is possible only to do religious studies phenomenologically, honoring religion, but whether, now, in the time after historicism, it is also possible to do sociology, religiously.

## Sociology of Religion

Despite the venerable lineage of sociology of religion, from general sociology's founding figures, a recent reviewer of the current situation (Beckford, 2003; 155; 165) observes “social theory's neglect of religion,” adding that “it is mainly the decline or absence of religion that is of interest to social theory these days.” This is particularly odd and interesting from an empirical vantage-point, since the evidence (Heelas and Woodhead, 2005; Forman, 2004; Wuthnow, 1998) is persuasive of a religious turn, in what Eliade might have called “western” culture. Of course, this is the turn to what Luckman (1967) early on identified as the “invisible religion:” an individualized, interiorized quest for meaning and being, both, varieties of which are now expressed under the umbrella-like rubric of “the new age.” This apparent cultural revitalization of religion as “*spirituality*” might of course be criticized as an extension of commodity capitalism (Carrette and King, 2005), or as Weber (1946) described earlier twentieth century new religio-political movements, as an “ersatz prophecy.”

New age avatars, and their analysts, neglect the sociological interest in religion and the centrality not only of religious ideas, but of religious experience, in the

social theoretic foundational works of Durkheim and Weber. If religious studies scholars are wary of classical sociology of religion, new age researchers omit it. Yet, both Durkheim and Weber share Eliade's commitment to the determinative primacy of religion, for culture, for intellectual formulation, and for what he referred to as "intimate being."

Durkheim, for example, rather than reducing religious phenomena to a positivist sociology, takes precisely the opposite position, asserting that religion is the basis for all other social phenomena.

This year (Durkheim writes in the *Année Sociologique* of 1899) as well as last, our analyses are headed by those concerning the sociology of religion. The according of the first rank to this sort of phenomenon has produced some astonishment, but it is these phenomena which are the germ from which all others – or at least all others- are derived. Religion contains within itself from the very beginning, even if in indistinct state, all the elements which in dissociating themselves from it, articulating themselves, and combining with one another in a thousand ways, have given rise to the various manifestations of collective life. From myths and legends have issued forth science and poetry; from religious ornamentations and cult ceremonials have come the plastic arts; from ritual practice were born law and morals. One cannot understand our perception of the world, our philosophical conceptions of the soul, of immortality, of life, if one does not know the religious beliefs which are their *primordial forms* (emphasis added).

If Durkheim's primordialism of religious forms, as a basic assumption, sounds like Eliade's archaic primordial model, when Eliade writes (1960; 232) that "It must not be forgotten that all these cultures have a religious structure," one can also then compare it to Weber's famous thesis about the religious palimpsest of capitalist, or indeed, modern, culture that he finds in Puritan Protestantism (1958; 27): "... the problem which is generally most difficult to grasp: the influence of certain religious ideas on the development of an economic spirit, or the ethos of an economic system. In this case, we are dealing with the connection of the spirit of economic life with the rational ethics of ascetic Protestantism."

Furthermore, Weber asserts the causal priority of religion in relation not only to an economic ethos, but to all of the cultural domain, and to what we might today call identity or self (1958; 183): "The modern man is in general, even with the best will, unable to give religious ideas a significance for culture and national character which they deserve."

Weber, though more complexly and reluctantly than Durkheim, writes in the rhetoric of modern science, fearful, in the closing pages of his most famous empirical study that he might "bring us to the world of judgments of value and of faith." Yet, is his condemnation of European culture – he begins the putatively explanatory, but now classic, study of the religious basis of culture by locating

himself, as “a product of modern European civilization” – any less severe than Eliade’s?

Such is Weber’s description of what Eliade merely calls nihilism (1958; 182):

No one knows who will live in this cage in the future, or whether at the end of this tremendous development entirely new prophets will arise, or there will be a great rebirth of old ideas and ideals, or, if neither, mechanized petrification, embellished with a sort of convulsive self-importance. For of the last stage of this cultural development, it might well be truly said: ‘Specialists without spirit, sensualist without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved.’

Eliade underestimated the affinity in values and sensibilities between himself and the formative sociologists of religion, with regard both to the causal power of religion for culture, society and self, as well as in the critique of modern European culture and the hope for a return and renewal of a less “disenchanted” (Weber) and “warmer” (Durkheim) emergent alternative. These general theorists of society and religion are themselves, certainly partly to blame for any misapprehension of their scholarly and cultural-religious commitments. Weber’s methodological essays are still taught today as arguments of value-neutrality in social science, and Durkheim’s methodological statement is still cited as the cornerstone of positivist sociological methodology. Moreover, Durkheim is rightly claimed as the progenitor and most influential ancestor of mainstream American sociology, and particularly in its emphasis on the study of institutions and focus on the problematic of social solidarity – a problematic that has now returned as a central social question of “social cohesion” among the policy analysts of the European Union (Green, 2006). In religion, it is Durkheim’s self-proclaimed institutionalism and insistence on the priority of ritualism and Weber’s emphasis, which he carefully, but expressly, juxtaposed to Marx’s monocausal materialism, on the socially causal power of religious ideas that remains the leading direction of their sociologies of religion.

Yet, their value commitments and inclinations brought them analytically to another general social analytic emphasis, and to a particular other face in the sociological analysis of religion. I have taken perhaps a radical interpretive position (Wexler, 2007) by claiming that both Durkheim and Weber, beyond their distinct emphases on religious ritual and religious ideas, respectively, shared the view that ecstatic experience of the sacred is the originary core foundation of the social. Less radically, in both their sociologies of religion, neither the institutional nor the ideational successfully displace the centrality of the category of “experience,” of a phenomenological approach to religion. For Durkheim, the importance of collective ritual assemblies in creating the shared conceptions of the collective conscience – which is not only moral or normative, but also cognitive and refers to the basic categories of understanding – is undeniably mediated by a certain “consciousness,” an experience, even “frenzy” of “communion” which in

its emotional power generates the energy which is at the heart of social being (Durkheim, 1995; 424):

... what defines the sacred is that the sacred is added to the real... We have seen, in fact, that if collective life awakens religious thought when it rises to a certain intensity, that is so because it brings about a *state of effervescence* (emphasis added) that alters the conditions of psychic activity. The *vital energies* (emphasis added) become hyperexcited, the passions more intense, the sensations more powerful...

Weber's sociology of religious experience is perhaps more complex, since there are multiple ways in which the relation between the social and the religiously ideational is mediated by experience. It should be remembered that Weber's soteriological interest and the development of theodicies of meaning, like Durkheim's collective ideas, is, in the first instance, a response to life in the here and now. (Weber, 1946:278):

Yet even after such a sublimation of orgy into sacrament has occurred, the fact remains, of course, that for the devout the sacred value, first and above all, has been a psychological state in the here and now.

The hope for salvation and the elaboration and, later, rationalization of the myths of redemption begin with the experience of suffering, and the dread of death. In addition, the determinative influence of religious ideas, different conceptions of the divine, does not directly move toward setting the terms of the secular habitus or ethos of rationalized conduct. Even if it did, "charisma," a state of grace," which is the "revolutionary force in history," would burst in upon routine rationalism, however sporadically, as in Scholem's (1971; 9) description of Jewish messianism. But the link between religious ideas and secular conduct is mediated by the sacred experience of the relation between the "devout" and "god." Here, the modes of relation define the character of the experience of the sacred, and ultimately the "direction" of religious ethics. Specifically, the "possession of god" or "incarnation" where the "goal was self-deification" (1963; 158), splits its methods of salvific divine possession into reception, as a "vessel," and into a "soteriological methodology" (p.159) of sanctification as an "instrument." "Spiritual suffusion" by becoming a vessel leads to the contemplative, mystical "road to salvation," while the instrumentalization of a transcendental god who cannot easily be possessed or incarnated, but whose grace can be attested by the "fashioning of a practical way of life" (p.286), leads to asceticism. These split modalities of religious experience are the bases of the different modes of prophecy, which are exemplary and emissary types, that represent, respectively, mystical and ascetic "roads to salvation," as different habituses, ways of life, religious states, or most directly, as different types of religious experience. The different types of experience and prophecy have an "elective affinity," in Weber's complexifying of causality, to different "conceptions of God."

This ordinarily underestimated emphasis on religious experience in Durkheim and Weber (for a brief corrective on Durkheim, see Rappaport, 1999:378) may be valuable in its own right, as a modification of institutionalism and idealism, respectively, as the mainstays of sociological interpretations of religion. Beyond the explanatory re-emphasis or “correction,” the experiential, phenomenological interest for both social theorists also underlines the social criticism which they share with Eliade, of modern, European culture, and of their desire also for a “new humanism,” for a practical socio-cultural alternative. This is an alternative re-grounded in the sacralization of everyday life. Along with Weber’s muted hopes for a renewal of prophetic religions that would be capable of working against the deadening “mechanical petrification” that is a result of the rationalized, secularized culture of Protestant asceticism, Durkheim’s hunger for a new sacred vitality is no less profound (1995:429):

In short, the former gods are growing old or dying, and others have not been born...It is life itself and not a dead past, that can produce a living cult. But that state of uncertainty and confused anxiety cannot last forever. A day will come when our societies once again will know hours of collective effervescence during which new ideals will again spring forth and new formulas emerge to guide humanity for a time. And when those hours have been lived through, men will spontaneously feel the need to relive them in thought from time to time - that is, to preserve their memory by means of celebrations that regularly recreate their fruits.

I want to suggest that Durkheim and Weber were deeply ambivalent moderns, attached to different, but also shared, visions of a sacred past, even of what Weber calls the “unity of the primitive image of the world.” They also harbor the same wish for a renewal of the sacred, which would offer social and cultural revitalization, against the background of the cold death of modern European societies. Their combined analytical and soteriological interest in sacred experience and in the religious basis of knowledge and culture can be seen as a precursor to a variety of contemporary quests for the re-sacralization of both society and knowledge. The irony, however, of the affinity of sociology’s intellectual ancestors to the current “new age” tendency, is that the emergent culture involves the supersession of sociology, or at least, a reversal in the relationship between sociology and the sacred, which would reposition sociology as a “collective representation” or “ethos” of renewed sacred experience. Following the sociologies of religion of Durkheim and Weber would mean, as Eliade suggested, that new problematics, and new concepts would emerge to represent the rediscovery of the varieties of “otherness.”

## Beyond the Regime of Sociological Knowledge

The de-legitimation of sociological knowledge began well before the nineteen sixties, with the application of sociology of knowledge approaches to sociology itself (Friedrich, 1970). From Mannheim (1936) to the Frankfurt School (1972) and in C. Wright Mills' (1943) early research on the social backgrounds and sociological beliefs of American sociologists, the initial claims of sociological objectivity have been challenged by historical, social and cultural contextualization, as well as criticized for the pretense of objectivity, in the face of its socially-interested, "ideological" character (Blackburn, 1972).

With the multicultural, postmodern turn in sociology, the ideology critique which had focused on Parsonian, American sociological theory (Gouldner, 1970) was supplemented by a call for recognition of the multiplicity of sociologies, for the repair of the exclusion of the sociologies of the colonized and the socially marginalized, and a return to a critical reassessment of the cultural particularities and limitations of the "classical" sociologists (Lemert, 1995). The "multi-plication" of sociologies, though a different strategy than Marxist or Frankfurt School critiques of ideology, de-essentialized sociological theory, and re-inserted its scientific face of cognitive autonomy back into history and a wider geographical and cultural social world. Sociology was itself a cultural expression, dependent on and variable with, different social locations in time and space. The postmodern challenge to normal science was to redirect at least some sociological attention to basic paradigmatic assumptions, and to interrogate both their social interest and broader cultural meaning. At the same time, the relativization of the sociological corpus led back to a re-examination of the roots of classical sociology. McCarthy (2003), for example, argued that sociology, unlike the other social sciences, has its basis, along with cumulated research, (p.2) in "... classical Greek assumptions about the nature of knowledge, community, virtue, political freedom and social justice." In his view: "It was the American tradition, and especially the writings of Talcott Parsons, which later *repressed* (emphasis added) these origins in order to transform sociology into a utilitarian and positivist science of explanation, prediction and social control." McCarthy aims to show that by virtue of their education and cultural-historical inclinations, the classical European sociologists were "returning to the dreams of the ancients;" by which he means the "ancient Greeks," and "the return to classical Greece." He wants to argue that their thematic foci represented the social theories and commitments of ancient Greek culture and philosophy.

The recontextualization of sociology includes also positioning sociology in relation to religion, although not as its super-ordinate observer. On the contrary, Vidich and Lyman (1985) try to show for the origins of American, rather than European, sociology, the extent to which the intellectual interests and paradigmatic

assumptions of the founders of American sociology, as well as contemporary sociology, reflect their origins in and commitments to the religious beliefs of American Protestantism (1985:1):

“But in the early decades of the twentieth century, American sociology began to separate itself from its most visible religious orientations. Substituting sociodicy – a vindication of the ways of society to man – for the theodicy that had originally inspired them, American sociologists retained the original spirit of Protestant world salvation. They substituted a language of science for the rhetoric of religion.”

The dissolution of sociology into its cultural, historical-philosophical and religious meanings belongs, as I have tried to show (Wexler, 2000), to a broad set of societal changes. Along with a plethora of “new social movements” or “revitalization movements,” some of which are now analyzed as a “new age,” (Heelas, 1996) or as a “spiritual revolution,” the de-legitimation of an objective, hegemonic sociology, opens the door to the revival of ancient traditions of social interpretation, and of the elaboration of new conceptions – which as Durkheim and Weber showed, for their time – that are rooted in the conduct and meaning of everyday social life.

The question which I posed in *Mystical Society* (2000) was whether this altered social life also encourages an altered social hermeneutic and the development of new concepts for social understanding appropriate to a different era. If indeed, part of the new social era is a “new age,” including the revival of ancient traditions, where questions of the sacred, and especially of mysticism, now coded as “spirituality,” return to center-stage, after their long, modern marginalizing secularization, does this not also mean a reversal in the relation between sociology and religion?

## Mystical Jewish Sociology

To the extent that *Mystical Society* is read, either in its English or Hebrew versions, it is most often cited as a sociological explanation for the rise of a mystical society, and as articulating the social bases of contemporary spirituality and the new age. My intent was to show and to summarize the arguments of others, from models of revitalization movements to theories of the information society, about why there is indeed a current return to the sacred in society, as mysticism, spiritualism and new age cultures. This socio-cultural return, however, was intended merely to provide a backdrop for a different project, which is a continuation of the decline of the regime of sociological knowledge, and an affirmation of classical and contemporary analyses of the origins of the categories of social understanding – including, significantly, sociology itself – in religious life, in the reality of the sacred, and in the experiences and conceptions of ancient religions, and especially, mystical traditions. The project then, and now, is not to offer a sociological explanation of the historical appearance of the mystical society

and the return of mystical religious practices from the socio-historical margins. The project is to show, continuing the view of both Durkheim and Weber, that socio-cultural knowledge has its basis in religious traditions, at the core of which is religious experience. The goal is not to create a mystical society and culture, which I submit again, already now exists, but to construct from there, a mystical sociology. In *Mystical Society* (2000; 1), I wrote:

Unlike postmodernism, the new society is not about the power of signs and the pervasiveness of cultural representations. Nor is it about the de-centering of the person or the dispersion of meaning. Rather, it's about being and experience, bodiliness and transcendence, and access to very old traditions of religious interpretations as successors to the current hegemony of social scientific languages in the academy and the diluted versions of those in mass culture.

About these languages, I wrote (p. 2):

We start to move away from familiar concepts: from self and socialization to talk of immortality as permanent transformation or 'reselfing'; from culture to being; from society to practices of revitalization; from social theory to cosmicization...

If the wished for "return" of classical sociology, and its religious studies critics, has already occurred, we should already been doing social analysis religiously; and if the "return" is a mystical and spiritual one, then doing it mystically and spiritually, albeit in a more rationalized, transposed, academic disciplinary context.

I tried to rethink several basic categories of sociology – the self, social criticism, society, education and sociology of education, and social interaction, through the lens of mystical traditions, on a platform of sacred knowledge. While I acknowledge that this was a preliminary attempt, it was also a pluralistic one, drawing "mysticism" from diverse sources, including native America religions, William James' psychologized American Protestantism, Hindu Tantrism, and Hasidism, drawing heavily from secondary sources, and including there, the work of Eliade, Idel and Culianu.

The construction of a mystical sociology, one which is both conceptually sensitive to the current socio-historical context, but rooted in traditions of sacred knowledge, is an enormous task, and invites and overwhelms the mere sociologist to swim in the not always calm waters of comparative religious studies. Dilettantism is probably worse than reductionism. Without surrendering my view that "new age" cultural assumptions ought to be deeply deconstructed into the ancient core religious traditions from which they perform their bricolage, and without surrendering my own interests in other traditions, such as Taoism and Yoga, in recent years, I have become more a student of the varieties of Jewish mysticism, in particular, in order to deepen, by particularization, the project of creating a mystical – now, Jewish – sociology.

This does not deny that there are already elements of a meeting between aspects of Jewish mysticism and sociology. More than twenty five years ago, Stephen Sharot (1982), offered elements and insights of a sociology of Jewish mysticism within his analysis of historic Jewish social movements. He described a number of dimensions of mystical social movements (p. 14), and summarized the perspectives that are taken with regard to such a social analysis. His own preference, and application, in my view, is for a Weberian sociology of religion approach to Jewish mysticism, through an emphasis on Weber's theory of charisma and routinization, as well as other aspects of Weber's sociology of mysticism (p. 158), which Sharot applies to an analysis of Hasidism. Sharot's assertion of the paucity of work in the field remains still largely true (1982;20): "There are many anthropological and sociological studies of millennial movements, but very little attention has been given to the social contexts of mysticism." A recent attempt to bring an anthropological perspective to bear on the study of Jewish mystical texts is different from Sharot's sociology of Jewish mystical social movements as its object, and also draws, in its emphasis on the analysis of ritual, from the Durkheimian, rather than Weberian tradition of sociological analyses of religion (Bloom, 2007). Within anthropology, Yoram Bilu has produced a continuous stream of important anthropological studies of contemporary, Jewish mystical phenomena (Bilu, 2007) and Yonatan Garb (2005) has brought sociological insights to bear on the connection between classical and contemporary Jewish mysticism.

This is the meeting of social science broadly, and sociology and anthropology particularly, which takes Jewish mysticism as its object of study. These valuable studies are drawn from the conceptual resources of modern social science, that were created, I would argue, before the crisis of the generative culture of modernity, and its social processes of rationalization, secularization and individualization. There remains an enormous amount of theoretical and empirical work to be done in order to build a sociology of Jewish mysticism; both in the objects of study in the huge historical and contemporary array of the varieties of phenomena under the catch-all category of "Jewish mysticism;" and in the bringing to bear of conceptual resources from general sociology and sociology of religion and applying them to the elucidation of these phenomena.

But, that is not the reversal of the relation between sociology and religion to which I have been referring, and which I suggest is part of a larger socio-historical transformation in the deconstruction of sociology, and part of a broad re-sacralization process generally; and a re-sacralization of social interpretation, particularly. This aspect of the rich and complex interaction between sociology and the traditions and phenomena of "Jewish mysticism" is a "mystical Jewish sociology."

This reversal, I should note, is not limited to the application of concepts drawn from within the traditions of Jewish mysticism to social phenomena. The

re-sacralization, as I indicated in *Mystical Society*, brings to the fore a variety of mystical traditions, and, their development as new analytics, and is not limited to conventional sociology, or, even, to the social field. Robert Hattam (2004) tries to draw the implications of one stream of Buddhism for rethinking critical social theory. Eleanor Rosch (2002), working from within Buddhism, also, in a centenary commentary on the American psychologist and mystic, William James, offers a specified analytic alternative to mainstream cognitive psychology. As Rosch makes the connection between James, Buddhism and psychology (2002; 37): “Within *The Varieties of Religious Experience* lies the germ of a truly radical idea. It is that religious experience has something important and basic to contribute to the science of psychology. Yet, now, a hundred years after the publication of James’s monumental work, the mainstream academic fields of psychology are no closer to considering let alone implementing this idea than they were in James’s day. Why?”

Rosch supplies an answer (p. 37): “Once we have divided the world into natural and supernatural (note that these are our own conceptual categories) and have defined religion as being about the latter, the *direction of causal analysis* (emphasis added) in naturalistic science can flow in only one direction – from psychology and cognitive science to religious beliefs and feelings.” Rosch, after specifying what this would mean in the analysis of a number of psychological phenomena, goes on to conclude (2002; 54):

“The study of religious experience has been too long the ostracized stepchild of psychology. Now on the centennial of the publication of James’s classic work, it is time to rehabilitate his quest and *take religious experience seriously* (emphasis added) (anathema as that may be in secular academia). The study of religion, through the medium of contemplative and meditative awareness, can contribute, in quite specific terms, to cognitive science and clinical practice as they are presently done. Beyond that, this kind of study offers a radical new paradigm and mode of investigation, for it calls into question the accepted understanding of the person or self, both as the subject of investigation and as the investigator.”

Recently (Wexler, 2007), I have tried to offer a specifically Jewish, extended example of a mystical sociology, by working through an analysis of social interaction that is drawn from practical models of social interaction in Habad Hasidism. The analysis, however, draws from kabbalistic ideas, images and metaphors, on the one hand, and, on the other, I attempt to reinsert the sacrally-derived categories into social history, and to suggest that they are part of an historical process of societal reintegration, In this sense, the analysis works back and forth, across the borders of sociology and religion, since the reintegration idea draws on theories of social movements, and I suggest further that the exemplary sacred practices may also be re-secularized, historically, constituting

a dialectic of the elementary forms of social interaction; or, the elementary forms of mystical sociality.

In *Mystical Interactions* (2007), I construct the categories of aura, cosmos and energy, as both successors to the conventional sociological categories, derived from classical sociology, of self, culture and society, and as descriptions of relational processes. In a typological abbreviation ( p.90), I indicated: " Concretely, and with especial reference to Jewish mysticism, aura works particularly in the domains of mystical prayer, cosmos is accomplished in Torah study, and energy is a focal point in meditative, mystical types of prophecy."

I try to show not only that categories derived from examples of Jewish mysticism, from "practical conduct" can make sense of sacralized social interaction, in an altered social context, but also that they offer general analytical resources for a theory of social interaction. Moreover, that is not a formal theory of interaction, but an historical one, suggesting the dynamic role of the practice and theory of sacralized social interaction in the re-integrative social processes that supersede the disintegration of society - which is a central focus of modern, classical sociological analyses. (Wexler, 2007; 90): "... there is also an oscillation between sacralization and secularization. Prayer, study and prophecy may be secularized, and their secular version may also then be re-sacralized. The sacred and mystical sociality that I have been describing is part of the wider process of social reintegration..." I concluded that section with the observation that this is another element in the larger project of creating a mystical Jewish sociology (p. 94): "... toward articulating a mystical sociology that more adequately re-sublimates theoretically, the deep changes in interaction and integration, which are actually occurring in the social present."

Sociological theory turns out, at least intellectually, to be neither reductionist nor imperialist, but a willing potential dialogical partner for religious studies generally, and Jewish studies, in particular. What this will mean beyond re-conceptualization, for what Eliade referred to as "intimate being," will require a discussion of not only the ideas of sociology, but also of its practice. After all, mystical intellection, as Moshe Idel (1998; 2002) reminded us, is a practical, embodied, pneumatic hermeneutic.

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## MARIA RADOSAV

# The Metaphor of the Book. The Hebrew Book and its Perception in the Jewish Communities of North Transylvania. The 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

### **Abstract:**

In Jewish tradition, the book as an “exemplary”, the book as an “object” is associated with an attitude of veneration as expressed by Pierre Chaunu in “livre en majeste” – the book in its majesty when referring to the Holy Bible.

The content of the book is revealed by its own referentiality enclosed in its text and by its unfolding through reading. On the other hand, the title of the book may suggest the plenitude of its text, a semantic sublimation, an essentialization of the content of the book. This is rendered by means of the metaphor, for metaphor implies a “translation” of significance and senses within syntagmas and word associations that exceed the referential meaning.

Therefore, several metaphorical categories may be discerned in the Hebrew book titles. A first category would concentrate symbolic, spectacular, luminiferous values in which light is the main attribute of the book, an attribute made up by superposing the light and the celestial, both defining the Divine: the BOOK as LIGHT. A second category of metaphoric phrasing would incorporate ethical – theological values. The metaphor BOOK as GATE codifies the idea of accessing, of entering in a livresque, bookish universe open to interpretation. The BOOK as PURITY and GRACE, the BOOK as BRIDE, the BOOK as CITADEL, the BOOK as THERAPY, the healing book would enter the same category.

The metaphoric repertoire reaches its climax with the BOOK as HOLINESS, a syntagma that induces the semantics of writing as a sacred task. Other significant metaphors included in the Hebrew book titles are: the BOOK as ADORNEMENT, the BOOK as SPLENDOR, etc.

In Jewish tradition, the book as “exemplar”, the book as “object” is associated with an attitude of veneration as expressed by Pierre Chaunu in “livre en majeste” – the book in its majesty when referring to the Holy Bible.

Beside a concrete perception that describes and reconstitutes the mechanisms that the book production and reification suppose and beyond the majestic and untouchable placement of the sacred book, outcome of a multi millenary act of veneration that inscribes the divine word, a *third facet* of the book is unfolded by the significance of the message that it conveys and that is articulated through various exceptional, stylized means of expression.

The content of the book is revealed by its own referentiality that the text discloses through reading. Moreover, the message of a book may be deciphered in its title for it epitomizes the essential of the text, its semantic connotation. A figure of speech, metaphor, is used to achieve it because metaphor presupposes a “translation” of significance and sense in syntagmas and word associations that exceed the referential meaning. Metaphor replaces the proper sense with the figurative sense of the words and by means of a reduced lexical economy of the title the metaphor becomes a short comparison: “brevior et similitudo”<sup>1</sup>. Beside text concentration, essentialized by a certain “conceptism” (a term relating to a literary school of the 17<sup>th</sup> century that made abuse of the metaphor), the metaphor covers a dual meaning, i.e. “it means something different than it actually expresses through words, it becomes *les figures de la pensee* and by no means *les figures linguistiques*”<sup>2</sup>.

At the same time, the metaphor combines a great variety of figurative connotations by means of a multitude of words (nouns, adjectives, verbs) of a certain typology shaped by various perceptions of the nature, of the life of “the living and the lifeless”<sup>3</sup>. The titles of the Hebrew books may be considered applications of the metaphoric universe, of the nuances and typologies enclosed by the metaphors. The title metaphors illustrate a *venerative* and *meaningful* perception of the message of the book. A book may epitomize in its title a great variety of perceptions and significances that a person (author or reader) can express. Equally, the metaphoric title of the book generates a seductive desire and self attractiveness to read it, while the spiritual and sapiential message serves advertising and marketing purposes. The *title metaphor* of a book encompasses innumerable meanings, connotations and sensations that all accompany the reading process. It becomes veneration and reading offer as well.

The semantic variety suggested by the metaphors of the titles reconstructs a sensitive and imaginative universe that in the Jewish society places the book to

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1 W. Kayser, *Opera literara*, (translation into Romanian), Bucharest, Ed. Univers, 1979, p.184.

2 Ibidem, p. 185

3 P. Fontanier, *Figurile limbajului* (translation into Romanian), București, Ed. Univers, 1977, pp. 79 - 82.

the center. The metaphor title of a book exceeds the *superlative imagination* from a sapiential, ethical, sensitive, esthetical perspective. The sublime the books enclose originates in the beauty, truth, refined taste, strong affectivity that are recurrent themes in the *Hasidic* pantheist and panentheist<sup>4</sup> literature of the 17th – 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. In a larger context, the sublime comes from the 17th century cultural movements that unchained senses and the “ordered” perceptions, from the 18<sup>th</sup> century French poetry that idealized nature, from the English esthetics, from a romantic exultance that was induced by beauty and picturesque, by the “intensity of the emotive” and sensitive “response”<sup>5</sup>.

The world as completeness of the divine presence envisions the sublime in various ways and the book, perceived mostly as divine inspiration, ascribed to the “warm cosmology of *Hasidism*”<sup>6</sup>, was identified with what Dionysius the Carthusian calls “venustas” and “pulchritudo”, as meeting place of the charm of the world with the divine beauty. According to the *Hasidic* perspective, the book is endowed with divine attributes as a sui generis object that are preserved when touching it. The book intermediates and officiates the essential *Hasidic* lesson, as Buber calls it, i.e. “to see God in all things, to touch God in all authentic gestures”<sup>7</sup>.

These considerations do not explain entirely the meanings of the metaphoric transcriptions, comparisons and analogies, that are included in the Hebrew book titles. The Hebrew metaphoric transcriptions bear resemblance to the Christian concept of the plenary, unique, ideal book, a concept that was the core of many disputes during the great cultural movements, from early Middle Ages up to the 20th century. Besides erudite definitions and conventions, the concept ended up in “illustrious metaphors: the *book-nature*, the *book-world*, the *book-life* that eminently literalize and summarize the idea of book, i.e. writing, letter, literature. Ultimately, they all express the secularization of the idea, of the reading and of the *divine book* written by the Divine and read by seculars that had their own perception and preconceptions. Nature, world, life progressively acquire cosmologic, epistemological, semiological, ethical, etc., connotations through a unique referent: the book as a universe of signs, a system of correspondences micro/macro cosmos, object of scientific investigation. It is the hermeneutic object by excellence for these “books” need to be deciphered, interpreted, reported to a code of significances”<sup>8</sup>.

From this perspective, a study, of the books that are stored in the synagogue of Satu Mare reveals a great variety of metaphors enclosed in the titles that might be categorized according to their meaning. A first category would concentrate

4 M. Idel, *Hasidism între extaz și magie* (translation into Romanian), București, Hasefer, 2001, p. 37.

5 E. Burke, *Despre sublim și frumos* (translation into Romanian), București, Ed. Meridiane, p. 37.

6 M. Idel, *op.cit.*, p. 322.

7 M. Buber, *Eu și tu* (translation into Romanian), București, Humanitas, 1992, p. 10.

8 A. Marino, *Hermeneutica ideii de literatură*, Cluj-Napoca, Ed. Dacia, 1987, p. 134-135.

*symbolic, spectacular, luminiferous* values wherein light defines the book. The isomorphism between luminous and celestial makes an attribute that defines the Divine. Therefore, the metaphor *Book-Light* is included in this first category, for its connotations that suggest luminosity imply religious meanings (the menorah). Such is the title of a book, *Menorat haMeor*<sup>9</sup> (The Lightening Candle), printed in Vilna in 1883, a book of *halachic* interpretations. The combination of the two terms introduces a metaphor of a “lifeless object but applied concretely to a lifeless object”<sup>10</sup>. It represents a second category of metaphors that also includes the sintagma *Book-Splendor* in which *splendens* is generated by *lumen* (*splendens sub lumine*). An illustration for it is the book of commentaries entitled *Tiferet haGershoni* (*Gershon's Splendour*), printed at Munkacs in 1902.<sup>11</sup> The juxtaposition of the two terms *lumen* and *splendens* appears in another title *Or haMeor*<sup>12</sup> (*The Light that Shines*), published at Lemberg in 1860. The title offers an accurate transcription of the two concepts. This isomorphism with tautological connotations, or “trivial isomorphism”, embodies the essence of the Divine, i.e. “light and brightness”<sup>13</sup>.

The light of the book or the book as light as title metaphor is general for it unfolds and recomposes itself in a great variety of meaningful structures and each of them ascribes new values: *ethical and axiological* as in *Or haEmet* (*The Light of the Truth*), printed in 1869<sup>14</sup>, *sapiential and cognitive* as in *Sefer Zohar haDa'at* (*The Light of Knowledge*), published at Mihalevitz in 1930<sup>15</sup>, genetical where the light of life (*zoe*) is suggested as in *Orah Hayim*, printed at Seini in 1925<sup>16</sup>. Moreover, this “*lumen genitrics*” is in itself a metaphor for life, it is a metaphor in metaphor because *lumen* means life - “in *luminis oras*” (in the realms of life) as it appears in Lucretius’s “*De rerum natura*”. It is a metaphor that transposes the characteristics of a lifeless object to an animated one and it makes the third category of metaphor according to P. Fontanier.

Antinomically, shadow, not only light, may become a title metaphor as in *Sefer Tsel haOlam* (*The Book the Shadow of the World*), printed in 1897 at Munkacs, written by “the great cabalist Matatiah, the son of the great rabbi Shlomo Delcort”, a book of commentaries on “Eden Garden and four other secrets”<sup>17</sup>. There might be a link between the four secrets and the four types of biblical exegesis encoded in the

9 *The Hebrew book collection stored in the synagogue of Satu Mare* (Col. S.M. in the following notes), Vilna, 1883, 6/18.

10 P. Fontanier, op.cit., p. 81.

11 Col. S.M., Munkacs, 1902, 18/283.

12 Col. S.M., Lemberg, 1860, 8/82.

13 G. Durand, *Structurile antropologice ale imaginarii* (translation into Romanian), București, Univers Enciclopedic, 1988, p. 144.

14 Col. S.M., title page missing, 4/269.

15 Col. S.M., Mihalevitz, 1930, 2/275.

16 Idem, Seini, 1925, 13/90.

17 Idem, Munkács, 1897, 6/54.

acronym *Pardes*<sup>18</sup>. As shadow of the world the book metaphor may have different meanings. It may refer to its omnipotent, tutelary spirit that emanates and captures the generating light but at the same time, it is the book that directs and shows the way in obscurity, in night, in hidden and unknown places. Consequently, it turns into an *apophatic* way to discover the book - light. According to cabalistic interpretations, the “metaphor of the shadow” may suggest the divine presence and is perceived as a “shadow placed on the right side” of man and as a “reciprocal presence”. It seems that Plato’s famous reflection “man is the shadow of the Divine” stands at its origins.<sup>19</sup> The book – shadow of the world is, in this case, a dedication to the principle of “reciprocal presence”. In Christian theology, the “reciprocal presence” may be simultaneous or close to enhypostasis, which means that the invisible hypostasis of the Divinity represents the Word, the Logos. The hypostasis carries the human nature just as the hypostasis of the Son of God carries the nonpersonal nature of man. The “reciprocal presence” presupposes enhypostasis as hypostatic union of man with the Divinity, i.e. a hypostasis that carries the Logos and the decisions of God the Father.<sup>20</sup>

Man, as reflection of the Logos is, ultimately, in its shadow. The divine presence as shadow is similar to a shield, a protective screen in the figurative sense of the word<sup>21</sup>. In the book *The Shadow of the World*, the metaphor “shadow of the world” may be understood as a way that leads to knowledge that finally disperses the shadow, in the sense that it directs to discovering and recognizing the Divinity, fact that represents the main aim in Christianity.

The metaphors that carry ethical and theological values make another category of book titles. This category includes metaphors like *book-gate* that transfer the same semantics from lifeless objects to lifeless objects. The concept of gate or “janua” proper to medieval and pre-modern Christian culture is used in the domain of languages and literature as “janua linguarum” and “janua litterarum”. The access to a universe of books and interpretations supposes both an introduction and an orthology in the field of interpretation. Two books *Masechet Baba Kama min Talmud Bavli (The First Gate Tractate from the Babylonian Talmud)* and *Masechet Baba Batra min Talmud Bavli (The Last Gate Tractate from the Babylonian Talmud)* with commentaries of illustrious authors such as Isaiah Berlin, S. Shmuel Eids, R. Meir of Lublin were printed in 1899 and 1903 in Vilnius<sup>22</sup>.

Alongside the same semantic context is placed the book that guides, the book of exegetical orthology in which the method of reading of the divine book is built on truth and authenticity and is rooted in the history of the written culture and

18 Cf. M. Idel, *Hasidism...*, p. 532.

19 Idem, *Cabala. Noi perspective* (translation into Romanian), București, Nemira, 2000, pp. 239 - 247.

20 I. Bria, *Dicționar de teologie ortodoxă*, București, Ed. Institutul Biblic și de Misiune Ortodoxă, 1981, p. 143.

21 G. Guțu, *Dicționar latin-român*, București, Ed. Științifică și Enciclopedică, 1983, p. 1263.

22 Col. S.M., Vilna, 1899, 16/334 and Vilna, 1903, 17/378.

in the Judeo-Christian comparative speculations. At Svaliva, in 1912 the book *Shulhan Aruch – Yore Dea (Shulhan Aruch – The Right Teaching)* was published. One of its parts is intitled *Bor Heitev* (The Good Fountain) and is a commentary of R. Mendel from Belz<sup>23</sup>. The *right* book, the *good* book is a metaphor that conveys an ethos that is structured on the ortho-doxy of its message, i.e. the divine word. Similar formulas that convey ethical and theological messages may be found in the Christian humanism and are called good letters/bad letters as “symmetrical distinction for true/false. “Bonae littere” or “Bonis sacrisque litteris” as formulated by Erasmus made a long career in meta-literature<sup>24</sup>.

In the proximity of the *good*, the *true*, the *right* book may be placed the book that conveys the idea of accuracy, purity, taintlessness in the exegetical and theological message. The metaphor of this book is offered by the syntagma that associates writing with purity and transfers the characteristics of “an animated object to another animated object”<sup>25</sup>. The clean book, the pure book, the *book – bride* have the same ethical and theological values due to the same mechanism of transfer of metaphorical meaning. In 1910, at Przemysl the book *Agra deCala (The Epistle of the Bride)* was published. It contains explanations and sermons on the Torah and was written by the famous rabbi Zvi Elimelech of Dynov<sup>26</sup>. Again, a book that embodies halachic interpretations becomes a metaphor book. According to Erasmus of Rotterdam, such a book turns into a “defensor pacis”, a state of grace that, ultimately, improves the qualities of man through reading<sup>27</sup>. The metaphor *book – citadel/fortress* recuperates those meanings. Such a work is *Sefer Milo haRoim (The book of the Shepherd's Fortress)*, a book of *hidushim* on the Talmud published at Przemysl in 1885<sup>28</sup>.

The metaphor book – therapy embodies values such as truth, justice, goodness, certitude, defense and, in addition, *sanity*. The message such book titles carries is a game between real and figurative, between the literary and metaphoric meaning following the pattern of the therapeutic advice that is directed by *soma* (body) and *pneuma* (soul). Such a book is Rambam's *Refuat haNefesh uRefuat haGuf (The Therapy of the Soul and the Therapy of the Body)*, published in Warsaw in 1913. The psycho-somatic therapy that the book contains consecrates the metaphor of the *healing book*. From the book – truth all through the healing book an entire metaphorical repertoire is gradually displayed that reaches full significance in the metaphor *holy book*. Beyond its literal and apodictic meaning represented by the Torah, the sacredness of the book is much related to the many faceted ways of

23 Idem, Svaliva 1912, 2/2.

24 Cf. A. Marino, op.cit., pp. 111-114.

25 P. Fontanier, op.cit., p. 81.

26 Col. S.M., Przemysl, 1910, 4/141.

27 A. Marino, op.cit., p. 113.

28 Col. S.M., Przemysl, 1880, 1/198.

perceiving the book. The semantics of sacredness derives from a certain degree of sacredness that an authorial text may have. It is not necessarily the question of the sacredness of the book but of the sacredness of a gesture, of writing, a much cherished and cultivated pursuit during the patristic and medieval times. An illustration would be a book of commentaries on the holidays entitled *Mikra Kodesh (The Holy Call)* that was published in 1900, at Bilgoraj, in Poland<sup>29</sup>. A metaphoric hierarchy emphasizes the complexity of the process of perceiving the book in the Jewish society and mirrors in the editorial and authorial outputs the diversified ways to approach the book, learning and writing.

The intellectual discourse was set forth by a cultural paradigm developed in the 18th century after the discovery of nature as the “science of the concrete”. It permitted “to observe the forms of the beings”, to look at and admire them. Therefore, the intellectual discourse reactivated the “sensitive potential of the human being”. The paradigm “man – reason” was replaced with “man – feeling” and in that proximity an entire esthetical literature was developed that tried to seize and define beauty<sup>30</sup>. By reactivating the “venustas” (the charm of the world), the beauties of nature, plants and animals the imagination of the authors was fertilized, fact that became evident in the book titles. The book – nature or the transfer of meanings from flora to fauna in the book title generates a metaphor that links the content of the book to the beauty of nature. At Satu Mare the book *Perdes Rimonim (The Orchard of Pomegranates)* was printed<sup>31</sup>. If *Pardes* is a transposition of the notion paradise, (as an acronym it encodes the four types of biblical exegesis) it delineates a first semantic group of metaphorical composition of the title. Another semantic interpretation would focus on the second term of the title, rimon - the pomegranate that has lots of seeds. From a seminological perspective, its inflorescence, its seeds may suggest a metaphor for teaching, learning, thinking. From a third analytical perspective, *Pardes Rimonim* was the title of the most famous book of Rabbi Cordovero, a cabalist whose writings were of utmost importance for the *Hasidic* thought<sup>32</sup>.

The paradigm of nature meets and interferes with the influences of the pantheism that was reshaped by *Hasidism* beginning with the 18th century. Undoubtedly, cultural paradigms multiply and contaminate reciprocally if we admit that the comparatist methods avoid selections and univocity when the great cultural, spiritual and religious movements are scrutinized. Along the same line, the book *Mishnayot – Seder Zeraim (Mishnayot – The Tractate Seeds)*<sup>33</sup>, published at Vilna in 1908, discloses

29 Idem, Bilgoraj, 1900, 1/78.

30 P. Hazard, *Gîndirea europeană a secolului al XVIII-lea* (translation into Romanian), București, Ed. Univers, 1981, pp. 336-339.

31 Col. S.M., Satu Mare, without year, 6/105.

32 M. Idel, *Hasidism...*, p.65 et sq.

33 Col. S.M., Vilna, 1908, 20/347.

a book metaphor based on the property of the subject (seeds) but it suggests the generic ipostasis of the book, i.e. seeds in the field of sapiential knowledge. The book *Sefer C'naf Renana* (Singing Bird)<sup>34</sup>, published at Przemysl in 1886, transposes in its title the valences of an “animate object”, the semantics of a book that sings and talks. Therefore, the metaphor of the book – nature and the metaphors that take over motives from the floral and faunistic world enrich in meaning. The *living book* is a very profound book metaphor as it suggests in a naturalistic manner the universe of the books and induces the idea of the book as a “locus amoenus”. Delights of the kind enter the European book production “beginning with the imperial era all through the 16th century”<sup>35</sup>. The reproduction of this motive in the title metaphors of the Hebrew books steadies various cultural and spiritual models that are parallel or interfere with each other. Titles like *Yearot Devash* (Beehives with Honey) printed in Warsaw in 1929<sup>36</sup>, *Shemen Rokeah* (Parfumed Oil), printed in Seini in 1909<sup>37</sup> concentrate sensations, emotional experiences, feelings, sounds, colors in the synesthesia of a place defined as “locus amoenus”. All these titles emphasize the idea of completeness and delight and the metaphors they enclose suggest a nourishing book for it incorporates the “frui fructus”, a book that fosters teachings and offers spiritual nouriture.

In 1878, at Warsaw a book of biblical exegesis written by Rabbi Bahya in the 14th century was published and was entitled *Kad haKemah* (The Jar with Flour)<sup>38</sup>, and at Simleul Silvaniei, *Lehem Shlomo* (The Bread of Shlomo) was printed in 1924<sup>39</sup>. The transfer of significances from the material, physical food to the spiritual nouriture contours a metaphor that includes the divine message. Satiety, abundance, plenitude, generosity are completed with the book – adornment, the book wherein the sapiential virtues are equated with the “decora” (decorations) and enters the same category of book metaphors. At Przemysl, two books were printed: *Panim Yekarim* (Precious Perles), a collection of midrashim for women<sup>40</sup>, and *Mahzor Rav Peninim* (Mahzor Lots of Perles) published in 1930<sup>41</sup>.

The book *Sefer Mat'amim* (The book of Dainties)<sup>42</sup> printed in Warsaw bears a metaphor with a richer significance. The book suggests a refined sensitivity that reaches maximalist meanings and induces – when it describes the holy customs of the people of Israel – acumen in a hedonic atmosphere. There is no doubt that, indirectly, the book equalizes the delights of life with the delights of the book following the same pattern of the metaphor of the book that substitutes the book

34 Col. S.M., Przemysl, 1886, 2/193.

35 E.R. Curtius, *Literatura europeană și evul mediu latin* (translation into Romanian), București, Ed.Univers, 1970, p. 230.

36 Col. S.M., Warsaw, 1929, 87/175.

37 Idem, Seini, 1909, 1/263.

38 Idem, Warsaw, 1878, 37/157.

39 Idem, Șimleul Silvaniei, 1924, 4/188.

40 Idem, Przemysl, without year, 8/42.

41 Ibidem, 1930, 5/20.

42 Col. S.M., Warsaw, without year, 87/183.

metaphor. This game of diversified metaphors that appear in titles colors and humanizes a universe of books assumed by the readers. The metaphor deepens symbolically and interpretatively a cultural reality. According to P. Fontanier, if the duality reality – symbol is accepted, the multitude of possible metaphors fall in two main categories, the concrete and the ethical metaphors. Equally, the book is perceived through metaphor for it conveys the attributes of the divine (sublime and beauty) to mundane, to man's terrestrial sensitivity characterized by delight and hedonism. The beauty and the sublime stretch out and recompose by assuming new meanings such as delicacy, diaphaneity, greatness. "The endless variety of genuine combinations that have to be searched in the characteristics of outermost things" is a result of that process. Sound, taste and odour may compose metaphors by "applying the notion of sweetness to images and sounds". Similarly, senses may continuously intermingle in such a way the "similar pleasures of other senses" may be replaced one with the other.<sup>43</sup>

Thus, it may be said that, the multifaceted ways of perceiving and approaching the Hebrew book reconfirms the centrality of the "livresque atmosphere", of the written word within the Jewish communities.

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43 E. Burke, op.cit., pp. 171-173.

# CRISTINA GAVRILUȚĂ

## Moshe Idel, the book and hermeneutics of negative

### **Abstract:**

For the one who studies the socio-anthropology of religions, the book itself is the main character of the fascinating journey that Moshe Idel proposes in *Perfections that absorb. Cabala and interpretation*. Starting from the imaginary of the book in the Judaic mystical literature, as presented by Moshe Idel, we have found four main hypostases of the book: the book as a pre-existent paradigm, the book as creation, the book as a paradox, and the book as a knowledge tool. We have noticed that these hypostases are to be found also in the folk products from the traditional Romanian settings this showing the presence of similar aspects regarding the representations of the book on a social imaginary level in various cultural areas. Thus, we have tried to present the hermeneutics of the negative and its applicability for the socio-anthropological study of some divinatory phenomena that make reference to the book or whose central point is the book. Moreover, the conclusions of this analysis have demonstrated the large applicability of the hermeneutics of the negative so well described by professor Moshe Idel. This can also be extended to other socio-humanistic sciences.

### 1. The book as “perfection of all things”

There's no doubt that books have always fascinated: they challenge, attract, reject, announce ideas and cultural trends. Beyond all these they are some of the material few living proofs that show that mystery and knowledge can be rolled into one, without risking to be diminished after this paradoxical association.

“Books are neither just some literary objects that should be carefully arranged on the shelves of the libraries, nor some common mediators of ideas among intelligences or agents for <<proposed worlds>> (we used here Ricoeur's appropriate phrase). They are at the same time nebulas created by rumours, by

religion, by the wise advertising, or in the modern time, by spreading a variety of critics. They are items that represent <<intellectual trends>>, that create on their turn predispositions for receiving and assimilating their contents and that of other books as well. The books and especially the famous one have haloes around them even long before being opened by the readers"<sup>1</sup>.

This presentation, more than comprehensive, of the book's universe introduces the desire of a great consumer of books and an "affectionate" reader, such as Moshe Idel for going beyond the materiality of the book and text. From all the book categories, the religious book is probably the most interesting. It remains the centre around which the collective images wove ideas, fantasy and different representations.

No matter if we speak about the *historical* or *ontological* character of the book's imagery such as Moshe Idel calls them its impact on the collective outlook is a permanent and irrevocable one.

Mankind witness a whole range of books which take as an author the divinity and which aspires at the statute of divine revelation. There are a lot of historical, literary and also ethnographical sources that show explicitly a mystic and magic revaluation of the book. Vedas, Thora, the Bible, the Koran are representative masterpieces that built around them strong religions, religions of the book. Thus, the books go beyond materiality, introducing themselves as hierophanies, which are embodiments of the divine logos. In these conditions the book doesn't represent a common message, idea, order or historical narrative anymore, but it becomes all – inclusive: "it is the book that contains and maintains everything"<sup>2</sup>.

The books absorb<sup>3</sup> in their pages things that our mind is not able to understand entirely, transmitting mystery and infinite respect. The difficulty is present only in the moment when one tries to understand and explain the text. When dealing with religious text the interpreter faces a great dilemma. Who has the supremacy: the divine author or the text?

### **1.1. The book as a pre-existent paradigm**

In some cosmogonic different readings the book represents the essence of creation itself. From the ontological point of view it is pre-existent to divinity. The evidence that comes from the Jewish cultural and mystical area proves this fact. "According to a very important midrash, God didn't create by writing, but by contemplating Thora, as a paradigm of the world (...). Thus, the written Thora has

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1 Moshe Idel, *Absorbing Perfections Kabbalah and Interpretation*, preface by Harold Bloom, translated by Horia Popescu, Iassy, Polirom Publishing House, 2004, p 133.

2 ibidem.

3 We used this term with the meaning given by Moshe Idel "in order to express the comprehensive and extended character of the text that, moving towards the centre of the Jewish society, integrated at the same time features which reminded of very important entities such Universe and God".

an intermediate statute, one that makes it share the statute of the pre – existence with divinity and contribute to the process of creation.”<sup>4</sup>

But what we find very interesting is the fact that scripts like these are described, for example, by some narratives that can be found in the Romanian traditional area. Similar evidence can probably be found in other cultural areas, too. This fact shows that the different cultural areas, independent one from another or contaminating one another lead to similar representations at the level of collective images. For example, the book is granted a paradigmatic statute in the process of creation. Being contemplating or just read, the book in this version seems to have estranged itself from the Creator. God himself took counsel with it when he created the Universe. Here we have what is said in a fragment from a folkloric Romanian poem:

“In a small incensed lemon – doored room  
He was sitting, also thinking  
And reading the Gospel  
He was thinking of creating  
Big high mountains and deep valleys”<sup>5</sup>

In some collective representations, the logos, in the past, appears as a graphical presence. This means that the whole creation, primary, is included in its textual state. Everything pre – existed in an all – inclusive book. What’s important is that the text, respectively the book, doesn’t represent itself as a creation of the divinity. Practically, there is not an affiliation relationship between the divinity and the book, but one purely instrumental: *so the book is the tool that was used for the Creation.*

## 1.2. The book as a divine creation

In other variants the book is understood as being itself a form of the creation which is a base for the Genesis. In the mystic cosmology, for example, the creation of language is before the creation of the world. This time the divinity is the one who is at the origin of all things. Moshe Idel shows in his paper that this thing is the best expressed in *Sefer Ietira* cosmology: “for the first time the Genesis of the world has been described systematically as a process that comes after the making of the letters. They were made from a primordial air or sky and after they appeared, God combined them in order to create the world.”<sup>6</sup>

4 Moshe Idel, work quoted, p. 68.

5 I. C. Bibicescu, *Folkloric Poems of Transylvania*.

6 Moshe Idel, work quoted, p.

The motif of *writing on the sky*<sup>7</sup> represents an image similar to the one described below. It can be found in different European areas, but in some Romanian areas, too. *Writing on the sky* is an absolute metaphor of the traditional spirit that suggested this way the divine origin of the book. More exactly, for the traditional man the whole world is a book whose unique author is God himself. "If only God let the Earth be black ink / the sky white paper / the sun a writer / and the moon a pen..."<sup>8</sup>.

Following the same logic of the presence of divine writing, the metaphor of "*writing on the sky*" is doubled by writing by carving in the stone: "After God stopped talking to Moses on the Sinai mountain, He gave him the two law slabs, of stone, written by the hand of God" (Exodus, 31,18). Other variants of the same divine presence of the origin of writing and book can be discovered at the level of the Romanian folklore. For example, the *Book of the World* represents a divine omniscient paper that explains everything that happens in this world. The narratives that illustrate the presence of a book whose author is the divinity itself, shows a close relationship between them. We would call it *affiliation relationship* between the Creator and his work, relationship that values mainly the position of the supreme author. In the economy of creation, the book becomes, this time a sort of mediator between Divinity and its Work.

### **1.3. The book and the paradox of the two fires in the Jewish mysticism**

What it seems to be even more interesting for us is the fact that in some mystic Judaic papers, according to Moshe Idel, you can have an anthropomorphic understanding of the book. It presents itself as a *white fire written with the characters of a black fire*, according to the author. "Thora has been written on God's arm. The term "white fire" hints at this skin, which is not mentioned explicitly. On it there have been craved black letters of Thora". The embodiment of God as "fire" is not new; we are used to it from the Bible where God is also called *es okhela*, "burning fire"<sup>9</sup>. This *anthropomorphism* of the book makes the relationship between the divinity and the book stop. Practically the book identifies itself with its creator and become one. This unity of the divinity with the text happens as a sort of *absorption of the divine by the text*, Moshe Idel notices. In this situation, the book and its divine author are given the same cosmogony importance.

The three variants, shortly sketched by us, describe the relationship of divine with the written text, beyond all types of interpretations, recall a beyond doubt fact: *for the collective images, the book and especially the religious book, has a certain representation*. It is not in the area of profane and temporality anymore, this time following that of sacred and eternity. Just on the line, the book identifies with the

7 About the motif "writing on the sky" see Ovidiu Papadima "The Motif of <<Writing on the Sky>> in the Universal Literature and Folklore" in the magazine The Literary Folklore, Timisoara, 1967, vol I.

8 Grigore G. Tocilescu, Cristea I. Ţapu, *Folkloric Material*, Bucharest, Minerva Publishing House, vol II, 1981.

9 Moshe Idel, work quoted, p. 69.

divinity itself whose unique author is. But this fact has its consequences at the level of the collective images and representations of the book in general.

#### 1.4. The book as a mediator of the true knowledge

No matter the way in which the relationship between the divinity and the book is reflected, one thing is for sure: it is the main expression of knowledge, of a true knowledge. From all those things showed above appears the fact that the direct access to this type of knowledge is limited for us. The only one who knows and is aware of everything is God. He contemplates, writes or identifies himself and also absorbs himself in the divine text. Is it possible for people to get this divine knowledge in these conditions? Not only the Kabbalah texts but also some legends and myths suggest that this thing can be accomplished.

Yet, we are not going to debate too much on these things but we will focus on one aspect that has been less discussed. It is about the subtle relationship between *sign, writing and divination* seen as a way of knowledge. Such an approach is, maybe, an extremely relevant one and supports the idea that, from the interpretative point of view, divination can be carried out in two directions: 1) in *formal, direct way*, which favours strictly the relation between *sign/significance*; and 2) a more subtle one specific for prophets, mystics, experienced or inexperienced magicians. Form here our work goes on with a *hermeneutics of the negative* and even of *daily life*.

Of course, we are tempted to think of a hermeneutics of the negative especially in connection with the written sign. This fact is entirely explicable, especially if we consider *The Book as "perfection of all things"*. The *sign – writing – divination* relation is connected to omniscience. It would be an incipient way (magic – religious one) of the later bookish knowledge.

Example of divination with the help of the book from different cultural areas are relevant. China, Mesopotamia or the Celtic area are familiar with specific ways of divination mediated through writing or sign. For example, in China "the divination not only predicts the future but also reveals the secrets of the Universe the way in which it used a text where there was written the order of the whole world on a slab which a certain god was to set out the destinies"<sup>10</sup>. The authors find enough arguments to support the idea that in China writing could be considered the *daughter of divining graphic*. A fact is that the Chinese ideograms express ideas, not concepts. This is a clue that the sign was perceived as having an independent communication value. Moreover, the Chinese perception on the sign shows the conventional nature of writing and of significance of what is written. An idea can be expressed only with the help of the sign; the interpretation, which is finding out the meaning and the significance of an idea, can be found out only when you

<sup>10</sup> Jean P. Vernant and co, *Divination and Rationality*, Paris, Seuil Publishing House, 1974, p 24.

go beyond the sign. Jean P. Vernant considers that, mainly, “the Chinese writing connects, in its principle, ideography to divination”<sup>11</sup>.

Another example is the Celtic one. According to a general definition, every Druid is a poet, a fortune teller or a prophet. There the divination was seen as “a science that lights up the spirit”. In the Celtic area, the *sign* had the same value or a higher one to writing, but this remains a redoubtable exercise of divination. Any written sign becomes a message which only the Druid manages to interpret exactly. Some of the poems show that the one who revealed secrets regarding the runes was the God Odin himself. Each runic sign doesn't represent a sound but an idea, which is opposite from our writing. Thus the Druids regarded the divination as a form of knowledge and connected it to the writing. A real proof is the fact the term used for prophet / divine is *witega* or in the earliest Germanic, *wizzago*. Both terms have a common origin: etymologically they derive from *witah* meaning *knowledge*. Such evidence can prove that writing could have its origin in a range of magical and religious practices. These, on their turn, would have as a support the idea of some existing comprehensive and of divine nature books. The ontological imagery of the book offers in time interpretative variants and specific practices connected to the bookish laic or religious works.

In the traditional Romanian areas and in the modern one we have the surprise to find the use of religious books (the Gospel, the Psalm book, the Bible or just praying book) in specific divination practices. The practice of *opening* the book, of *reading the Gospel or the divination with the help of the key and of the book* are just a few examples. “Yet there are people who take the ill ones or those who are in trouble to the priest in order to follow the law and the priest would open for them a church book at random, usually the Gospel, and where the book opened the priest would read and would use whatever word he found useful in order to tell the person about his illness, his death and how many prayers to give to priests and how much these will cost him: a sort of oracle! Usually, in order to follow the law they have to make the service of the extreme unction.”<sup>12</sup> The practice of opening the book can be found even nowadays: “I've been to the priest, too, and he opened the book for me but not now, it was in the past. He crossed on the book and he made me open it. I knew that if it opens it at red it's good sign, but if it's black it means trouble. After I opened it, the priest told me as if he was reading but he wasn't...in the book wasn't written about my trouble but he could see in it what I was interested in. And he told me all the right things...”<sup>13</sup> (E. 68 years old, Suceava)”

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11 Ibidem, p 44.

12 G. Teodorescu-Kirileanu, apud Alexandru Ofrim, *The key and the psalm book. The imagery of the book in the traditional Romanian culture*, Bucharest, Paralela 45 Publishing House, 2001, p 312.

13 It's about an interview fragment made in Suceava county in 2004 that certifies the existence of the divination practices with the help of the book in some Romanian areas.

The main clues in the case of divination by opening the book are: the colour of the letters (red or black) and the content of the chapters. Ion H Ciubotaru in the *Great Passage* writes about this. For instance, if the book opens for an ill person at the chapter *The Beatitudes* it means that he will shortly die, but if the book opens at Job's life he will have the same destiny as the character. All these as well as a series of customary linguistic formulations ("is written in the book", "what's in store for you it will definitely happen", "book knowledge possessor") indicates peoples' belief in the existence of sacred books, some times mysterious (*The Book of Life, The Book of the World, The Book of the Faith*) omniscient. The Romanian folklore has a series of poems that sustain this:

"Father Ilie,  
Look in the calendar  
And then in the book  
Do I have many sins..."<sup>14</sup>

The folklore lyrics evoke the possibility of getting knowledge using the book. The simple reading, interpretation, contemplation could be ways of real knowledge. Certainly we can use either a *mantic* interpretation (as the examples above shown) or a *rational* one (literary – linguistic, historical, philosophic, etc)<sup>15</sup>. What is very important in this equation, *sign – writing – divination* is the fact that the mantic understanding of a text has created what Moshe Idel called "the experiential discovery through the spiritual living of the divine in a text"<sup>16</sup>. The colour of the letters, the form of the text, its position, the simple presence of the book and even its reading define magical – religious practices that hide behind them a sort of representation and capitalization of the book. No matter the situation, the writing remains support, *pre-text* or mediator for knowledge. The fact that behind the sacred text is situated the divine author himself, the act of interpretation gets other meanings. These capitalize exactly the unseen part of the text, the negative one.

14 Romulus Tudoran, "Folkloric poems in an Transylvanian manuscript from 1831" in *The Annual Folklore Archive*, 1945, VII, p 137.

15 Referring to the rabbinic methods of explaining the Thora, Moshe Idel uses the term *drs*. The conclusion is "Passing from an oracular use of the root *drs* about God to a research of the text in a critical way is an evolution that supposes that the text has replaced the divine direct revelation" (Moshe Idel, *Absorbing Perfections. Kabbalah and Interpretation*, p 237)

16 *Ibidem*, p. 237.

## 2. From the hermeneutics of the negative to the hermeneutics of the everyday life in the divination practice

### **2.1. The hermeneutics of the negative as a (self) contemplation of the divine**

Describing the book as *black fire on white fire* hints at what Nicolaus Cusanus called *coincidentia oppositorum*. Black and white are contraries which naturally cannot stay together. They can represent a paradoxical formula (black fire on white fire) which emphasizes the divine and sacred origin of the book. Even the medieval cabbalist interpretations of this image hint at, according to Moshe Idel, the symbolic dimension of the two fires. "The inner shape is the white space, the place of the black configuration of the letter. The inner shape is the important one as well as the soul that sustains the body"<sup>17</sup> This fact is the premise for finding another way for interpreting the sacred text. This time the textual message is not the most important element anymore. What becomes really interesting is the *shape of the text* reduced to a mixture of white and black fire. This is why in some variants of the midrash texts quoted by the professor Idel and in some folkloric representations of the book, God *contemplates* it and doesn't read it. Thus we understand that the text finally represents a *pre-text* for reaching the essence.

Taking these in consideration, Moshel Idel proposes a hermeneutics of the sacred texts, especially of Thora's. Any written letter (black) makes room for white outline and spaces that form the *negative of the text*. *If the text doesn't represent but a pre-text for the reader and writer of the religious book, then what makes sense in this textual mixture of white and black is exactly this negative that is as an white alphabet*. This is the real knowledge. Certainly the hidden and true meanings of the scared texts are beyond words and their shape. They can be identified with the white from the negative of the text and just on the line they identify with the divinity itself. "Thora has been written on God's arm and implicitly on God's arm's skin. The term "white fire" hints at this skin, which is not mentioned explicitly. On it there have been craved black letters of Thora"<sup>18</sup>.

Going back to the same moment of the contemplation<sup>19</sup> of the letters / text written on divinity's skin, the act of creation reveals to us as being a (*self*) *contemplation* of the divine. The truth and the mystery of creation is, thus, beyond letters and words, is in the divine creator himself. "From a semiotic point of view,

<sup>17</sup> Moshe Idel, work quoted, p 73.

<sup>18</sup> Moshe Idel, work quoted, p 69.

<sup>19</sup> As Moshe Idel suggests, in some midrash variants of the contemplative act of the divinity doesn't undermine the importance of the text and transforms Torah into a world project.

only the black dimension operates as a meaningful significant, because only it transmits a certain message to the readers. But, from mystical perspective (and magical – religious – our note), the white fire has a superior statute which, even if is semantically meaningless and rather than showing directly the divine body, it shows God's intention as it is expressed in Thora.<sup>20</sup>

Such mystic understanding of the text is echoed at the level of the collective images. We consider two of the aspects in which such interpretative motifs could survive. We would mention here the attitude of the (post)modernist reader of revealing the meanings and significances of a laic text. Unlike the religious reader, the laic one struggles to puzzle out and “build” new meanings of the red text. The scheme of interpretation that is applied here could be summarized in the formula: *the act of reading – sign – significance*. Even if he is aware of the fact that the text has some hidden meanings, the laic reader is not able to separate himself from the materiality of the text, which for the religious one happens exactly the opposite thing. In the case of the laic text, this *democratic reference* of the reader, as Moshe Idel announced, doesn't go beyond the borders of the text, for finally capitalizing its negative. The *analytical step* that is preferred by the laic reader “replaces the mutual exchange between the reader and the subject of its belief.”<sup>21</sup> Moshe Idel sees in this a *disintegrator step* and not an *integrator one* as it happens in the case of religious reading.

On the other hand, we would also notice the presence of this “reading of the negative”, at least at an unconscious and intuitive level regarding some magical – religious divination practices. They show a certain availability of the interpreter of exploring the unknown using the sign as a *pre-text*. The researches carried out by us showed that this fact is specific only for a certain category of people. Getting rid of the rational and analytical restrictions of the modern science they claim to be followers of a new folkloric science that values the symbol and its presence in the world as a mark of the negative.

## 2.2. The hermeneutics of negative and the divination practice

As we have already shown, the theory of the hermeneutics of negative can also be successfully applied in the case of divination practice. I understood this fact when I was doing a research for my doctor's degree paper, after a conversation with a person who practices coffee fortune telling. Here we have a part of her confession: “I can *tell* fortune by using coffee for many years. I am gifted... I also happen to have strange dreams that predict some things... With coffee it is easier: one has to understand and explain the black signs which you see in the coffee after you *turn* the cup. *Ring* means *engagement*, the *number five* means *marriage*, the *crown* is the symbol of *great achievements*, rows of *coffee* mean *journey*, *crosses*

20 Ibidem, pp. 70-71.

21 Moshe Idel, work quoted, p. 150.

mean *events* and *rabbit* suggest *fear*... If they appear on a white background they are good omens, but if they appear on black background they are a sign of ill omens and they foretell even death (...) I've met a woman who read only the white parts from the coffee grounds, not the traces left by it. Yes... she was really gifted and inspired... But it's very difficult to do that. She taught me how to do it. She used to say that there you can find the real auspicious sign..." (D, 48 years old, Suceava)

These statements are extremely suggestive, revealing the fact that some people intuited the importance of *the negative* within the interpretative act. Two aspects of our research suggest this fact: 1) *the colour of the background* which symbolizes the positive or negative value of the sign and its significance; and 2) using *the negative* as a sign for being interpreted. In fact, it is quite hard to believe that some common sign that can be associated with different things of the material reality and that can easily reveal different interpretations, are able to disclose absolute permanent truths.

From the hermeneutics of negative point of view the signs can be considered common visible ways of mediating the penetration of the invisible, of the negative. Of course, this fact could be turned to good especially for those who perceive divination as an art which allows a hidden, true knowledge, characteristic of the divinity. For the others, who practice it more as a game- like exercise, of entertaining or even as a way of doing profitable business, the idea of meeting with the true knowledge included in the negative of the text could function at the most, at the level of the unconscious. In many situations it stops at the effort of interpreting some signs and symbols according to pre-established codes. There are also exceptions: "At the beginning it was a game, a curiosity, but I've realized that something strange happens... a sort of inspiration that surprises me when the others confirm some of my foresights. How could I explain this to you... I just look at the signs and lots of ideas cross my mind" (V, 46 years old, Suceava).

Therefore the complete way of the interpretative act in the mantic practices would be the following: *the person who study hermeneutics resorts to a practice in order to discover signs and then significances and finally reaches the negative of the sign*. We refer here mainly to the divination practices which require a certain initiation and which are first of all understood in a spiritual manner.

In this situation it is natural to wonder: Could it be possible to explain any divination practice by the mediation of this model? How could we distinguish the negative of every sign (volation of birds, the "sigh" of trees, the images of a dream etc)? we suggest to answers which could offer some explanations:

- a) At an empirical level, we consider that the negative is represented by the context itself in which it is produced. In other words, it's about a *hermeneutics of daily life*. The psychoanalysts understood this fact and interpret the dreams

in connection with known events in the person's life.<sup>22</sup> If we accept this fact, than the one who practices divination is an extremely subtle observer of the reality. He reveals future knowing the present and the past. How can he do it? Probably, on the basis of a precise combinatory logic. The fractal method proposed by Ioan Petru Culianu can be successfully used in this context. Culianu himself showed the viability of his theory, anticipating long before the fall of the communism regime from Romania and the approximate structure of the first post December government<sup>23</sup>.

- b) At another level, revealing of the negative can be similar to obtaining divine knowledge on spiritual ways unknown to any mortal. This time the sign and, implicitly, symbol would be just simple pretexts for the one who has the secret of interpretation of the "white spaces, of the negative". Is the case of the inspired divination when some initiates can spontaneously express some things that belong to some different temporal dimensions. As the reading of Thora can open the believer's spirit towards a transcendental reality, ineffable, the contemplation of certain signs can offer the same results, too. In the first case the belief and the feelings are privileged, in the second one is privileged an experimental way.

## Instead of conclusions

Starting from the imagery on the book and using the Judaic mystic interpretations, Moshe Idel proves that a certain type of "reading" of the religious book can lead to some surprising results. So, the hermeneutics of negative can cause not only an extraordinary experience in the field of knowledge, but also

22 A relevant example is the casuistry from C G Jung's works or those dedicated to it. Some examples in this respect are: C G Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, commented by Daniela Jafee, translation and footnotes by Daniela Stefanescu, Bucharest, Humanitas Publishing House, 1966; C. G. Jung, *Psychoanalysis and astrology, selected texts*, introduction and notes by Jean Chiriac, Bucharest, Aropa Publishing House, 1999; C. G. Jung, *Psychology and the Occult*, translation by Dana Verescu, Bucharest, Trei Publishing House, 2004.

23 In an interview by Gabriela Adamesteanu for "Revista 22", Ioan Petru Culianu tries to suggest that the fractal model was known and practiced by the Russian secret services. In his opinion, "at the moment the KGB, using super – computers (those are machines that cost tens of millions of dollars and can make a model of the world for a couple of years or more) - during Andropov's government – realized that it doesn't lead anywhere. Then they realized that for having a market economy the gains will be higher than the losses. They demolished the wall and they started all the movements in the satellite countries" (Ioan Petru Culianu. *Sin against the spirit*, Bucharest, Nemira Publishing House, 1999, p 42). Probably Culianu used the same model, of the combinatory logic, when he gave an interview to Mario Baudino, published in "La Stampa". Thus, yet since March 1989, the author was speaking about "the imminent revolution and about the inevitable bloodshed" (Ibidem, p. 59). The affirmation repeats itself and in "The Free World" from 9th of December 1989. what seems to us of extremely actuality is the future of Romania described in eleven points. The problems presented by Eliade's disciple in Chicago proved to be real. In part, there were some answers and solutions in time.

an absolute one, too. Just on the line, it can mediate the meeting with the author of the divine text. When it is about a religious reading, this “meeting” is under the influence of outstanding experiences and miracle. We would be tempted to believe that this type of interpretation can be specific only to the experts of the sacred in a certain culture. But it’s totally wrong. We have proved that in different cultural areas the collective images gives a particular ontological statute to the book, especially to the religious one. So it’s here where we should look for a whole range of representations and specific practices. So, there are some predilections, at least at the level of the social outlook, that would favour another type of “reading”. That is why we believe that the researches and theories of Moshe Idel are worthy because of the presentation and analysis of their multitude of ideas and their applicability as well.

More exactly, we believe that the hermeneutics of negative applied to social sciences researches (Sociology, Anthropology etc) can bring about new perspectives of approaching the studied realities. Beyond the statistics data is hidden the profound reality. In a logic of the hermeneutics of the negative this could mean for the nowadays researches that negative marvellously mentioned by Moshe Idel.

Finally, the research assumes a *hermeneutics of the daily life*, a coming back to the interpretative data. Thus, the interpretation can reach a philosophical and religious understanding of Man and Universe. After all, the negative of this daily living assumes the perception of the hidden and deep meanings of our existence.

When reading *Absorbing perfections. Kabbalah and Interpretation*, it is impossible not to ask yourself essential questions regarding your own reader statute. There is no doubt that understanding the text beyond its literal sense is the privilege of great minds. The negative of its challenging success shows that Moshe Idel is one of them.

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# MIHAELA MUDURE

## Moshe Idel Ascension on high in Jewish Mysticism: Pillars, Lines, Ladders

Budapest: Central European University Press, 2005.

### **Mysticism as Ascension**

Moshe Idel is one of the most eminent and influential scholars in Jewish mysticism in the world. Born in Tirgu Neamt, Romania in 1947, he immigrated to Israel in 1963. Here Moshe Idel had the privilege to study under the supervision of Gershom Scholem, one of the most knowledgeable scholars in religious studies and history of religions. Stepping into his master's shoes he became one of the leading experts in Jewish mysticism. At present Moshe Idel is Max Cooper Professor of Jewish Thought at Hebrew University in Jerusalem and has also served as a visiting professor and research scholar at numerous universities and institutions in the United States and Europe. His numerous publications include *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*; *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*; *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics in Abraham Abulafia*; *Hassidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic*; *Messianic Mystics*; and *Absorbing Perfections: Kabbalah and Interpretation*. Never has Moshe Idel forgotten his Romanian origins and he generously offers lectures and presentations, and scientific advice to students and faculty from the universities of Bucharest, Cluj or Romania, in general.

In 2005 Moshe Idel published a very comprehensive study of the idea of height, rising to heights and the pillar, the ladder as the instrument and the instrumentalization of the human fascination with the above at Central European University Press. *Ascension on High in Jewish Mysticism: Pillars, Lines, Ladders* appeared in a series coordinated by Pasts Incorporated and edited by Sorin Antohi and Laszlo Kontler.

Well known for his subtle explorations of the connections between the Eros and the Kabbalah, of medieval Kabbalists and the eighteenth-century Hassidic mystics' explorations of letters and the alphabet and their impact upon postmodern literary

theory, especially upon the work of the Sephardic Algerian Jewish philosopher Jacques Derrida, Moshe Idel proves, once again through his 2005 book, that he never camps in one restricted area for ever. His scientific interests are amazingly diverse within the vast range of history of religions and his scholarly curiosity always finds new targets.

*Ascension on High in Jewish Mysticism: Pillars, Lines, Ladders* has the rare quality of being a very interesting and challenging reading both for the elite, sophisticated reader and for the common reader who maybe simply curious and wonders about the human fascination with heights, ascensions, and what may be above the skies. Why are we culturally constructed as such? Although Moshe Idel does not say this overtly, the reader can easily come to the conclusion that this fascination with long, lean, and taut shapes, the magnetism of everything that is high and upright, be it a pillar, a tree or anything else with similar shape is a cultural universal. Again whether this fascination explains the privileges that the upright phallus has over the offer of femininity is not any concern of Moshe Idel but the richness of his cultural considerations does invite the reader to further meditation and analysis. Is the privilege of the pillar-like forms and experiences (the prayer is also directed to heights, it is also a kind of ascension) the basis for the patriarchal foundation of culture or is it the patriarchal foundation of culture that makes us, humans privilege this shape, this direction? Again no answer is given directly by Moshe Idel to this question but the richness and the complexity of his intellectual enterprise invites any reader to try and find his or her own answer. I would add that in a very Jewish way, he prefers to invite us to ask questions rather than impose upon us the answer that he surely has.

Moshe Idel explores with scholarly competence and relying on an extremely minute bibliography the fascination with ascension in various cultural contexts. He pays particular attention to the Neoplatonist and the Neoplatonic perspectives, he offers us a hermeneutic “descent” into the intricacies of ascent through the ten sephirot, he analyzes the complex Zoharic conception of the pillar as the ninth manifestation of power, the divine phallus and the representation of the concept of righteousness. Neither does he omit the Hassidic mystics and their experience with the above as well as the medieval and the Renaissance philosophy represented by several Arab thinkers and Pico della Mirandola.

From a Romanian perspective it is interesting to note that Mircea Eliade and his disciple Ioan P. Culianu appear frequently in the bibliography of this study and they even form the object of a sub-chapter. Moshe Idel insists on a possible connection between Mircea Eliade’s attraction to right wing ideologies, his equally gradual moving off from this position after World War II and his perspective on Jewish mysticism and the role of the elite and the masses in the creation and the popularization of various forms of mysticism. Namely, the farther Eliade gets

from his prejudice, the more he recognizes Jewish mysticism as a sophisticated “product” of a sophisticated elite.

The pillar or the ladder (another means to ascend heavens) are never considered by Moshe Idel as architectural elements although their presence or symbolism in various religious buildings in several cultures may form the object of another equally fascinating study. With Moshe Idel the importance of the pillar and the ladder lies in their connecting different levels of reality. With various thinkers and depending upon the cultural context, they become cosmological entities stretching from earth to heaven, or they turn into theosophical entities, part of the divine world. The pillar that Moshe Idel is particularly interested in is the pillar of prayer, the mystic, the righteous whose body itself may become a connector between the worlds during a mystic experience.

It is beyond any doubt that Moshe Idel’s excursion into the depths and the heights of religious ascension, be it by help of the prayer, the homiletic experience, or the mystic meditation, is one of those very special books where the bibliography, although rich, does not hamper the reading but stimulates it. *Ascension on High in Jewish Mysticism: Pillars, Lines, Ladders* is a book for other scholars, but also a book for anybody who has the curiosity of a scholar.

# NICOLAE IUGA

## Moshe Idel, Maimonides and the Jewish Mysticism

Rom. translation by Mihaela Frunza, Dacia Publishing house, Cluj, 2001

The idea that among the contemporary scholars, Moshe Idel is a reference name for the Kabbalah philosophy is unanimously disseminated and accepted. An extremely difficult, refined, esoteric field, not to be approached without a solid knowledge of the Jewish culture, language and religion. It may be a useful exercise for the neophytes, as a propaedeutic exercise, to approach the writings of Maimonides, the Jewish Medieval thinker (12th century), connected, through Aristotelian influences, to the universal philosophy. Moshe Idel's book *Maimonides and the Jewish Mysticism* facilitates, in our view, this mediated contact with kabbalah, via Maimonides; moreover, it reveals the inner relationship between that big author called the Eagle and the kabbalah deep and persisting flow.

In this book Moshe Idel approaches the birth of the kabbalah as a double reaction to Maimonides' way of thinking. Etymologically, in Jewish *kabbalah* means pure tradition. Many of the first kabbalists named themselves like this and their approaches were called kabbalah because they decided to reveal some of the older mystic – esoteric traditions, as a reaction to the interpretation of the Genesis narration suggested by Maimonides according to the Aristotelian spirit<sup>1</sup>. Moshe Idel's monograph represents the first thorough approach of this topic.

There had been pre-kabbalistic ideas for centuries, making the contents of some verbal traditions, which were not anchored in writing, nor learnt from books, but "by the mouth" of a master. Then, the "Jewish mysticism takes its roots from the Bible itself"<sup>2</sup>. The main esoteric topics of this type are two: *maase Beresit*, concerning the Creation narrated in the first chapter of the Genesis and

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1 Moshe Idel, *Maimonide și mistica evreiască*, Ed. Dacia, Cluj-Napoca, p. 6 sq.

2 I. Epstein, *Iudaismul*, Hasefer, București, p. 290.

*maase Merkava* (the Divine Chariot), an interpretation of prophet Ezekiel's famous vision. Thus, an interpretation using Aristotle's philosophy of ancient topics of the Hebrew thinking gave birth to the Kabbalah. Consequences are important, both for the Jewish culture in particular and for the world culture and philosophy. Inside the Judaism, the appearance of the kabbalah literature equals, in some people's opinion, a real "Jewish "Revival"<sup>3</sup>. Second of all, considering the universal philosophy, Maimonides reaches the performance of what was later to be called the philosophic system. Maimonides conceives God in the Aristotelian spirit, like an existence deprived of any external cause<sup>4</sup>. Five centuries later, Spinoza shall define the substance as being something existing inside the self and for the self and not needing the concept of any other thing to be created. Thus, Maimonides reveals himself as one of the connection rings between Aristotle and Spinoza, between the Ancient Times and Modern Times.<sup>5</sup>

Second of all, Moshe Idel highlights another aspect of this issue. Kabbalah scholars believed that the Genesis process of Creation (*maase Beresit*) is not a cosmogony similar to the Greek mythology and philosophy, but inner-divine process are being approached here. Indeed, in the Genesis, God is nominated by the word *Elohim*, which is a plural. God Himself speaks to himself using the plural, for instance: "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness" (Genesis I, 26) , etc. Or, Maimonides ignored the Creation mystic interpretation, bringing in a philosophical interpretation where the Creation is represented as God's relationship with the world, not as an inner-divine cosmogonic process.<sup>6</sup> But what does the inner-divine process suppose? In the kabbalah, there are four successive worlds where the Infinite is represented into the Finite. The emanation (*atzilut*) of the world does not necessarily come from God, but from *Sefirot* (ideas, patterns). The sephirot, in number of ten, are the agents used by God to „irradiate“ the elements of the Universe, without diminishing His power at all.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, the kabbalah scholars saw the philosophic interpretation of the Creation narration as a depreciation of the secret significances contained in the sephirot theosophy.

In his book, *Maimonides and the Jewish Mysticism*, Moshe Idel outlines, in an extensively scholarly and convincing framework, the important role played by Maimonides not only in the philosophic sphere, but also in the impulse he gave to the development of the kabbalah- origin Jewish mysticism.

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3 I. Epstein, *Iudaismul*, Hasefer, București, 2001, p. 290 sq.

4 Idem, p. 11.

5 Spinoza, B., *Etica*, E.S.E, București, 1981, p. 5.

6 Moshe Idel, *Maimonide și mistica evreiască*, ed. cit., p. 19.

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