STUDIES IN JUDAISM / 3

Kabbalah AND Postmodernism

A Dialogue

SANFORD L. DROB

Kabbalah and Postmodernism: A Dialogue challenges certain long-held philosophical and theological beliefs, including the assumptions that the insights of mystical experience are unavailable to human reason and inexpressible in linguistic terms, that the God of traditional theology either does or does not exist, that "systematic theology" must provide a univocal account of God, man, and the world, that "truth" is "absolute" and not continually subject to radical revision, and that the truth of propositions in philosophy and theology excludes the truth of their opposites and contradictions. Readers of *Kabbalah and Postmodernism* will be exposed to a comprehensive mode of theological thought that incorporates the very doubts that would otherwise lead one to challenge the possibility of theology and religion, and which both preserves the riches of the Jewish tradition and extends beyond Judaism to a non-dogmatic universal philosophy and ethic.

Sanford L. Drob holds doctorate degrees in philosophy from Boston University and in clinical psychology from Long Island University. He is on the core faculty of the clinical psychology doctoral program at Fielding Graduate University in Santa Barbara, California, and on the faculty of New York University Medical Center. In addition to numerous publications in clinical, forensic, and philosophical psychology, Dr. Drob is the author of two previous books on the Kabbalah as well as articles on Jewish philosophy that have appeared in various journals, including the *New York Jewish Review,* for which he served as editor-in-chief for several years. Dr. Drob's recent work explores Carl Jung's intimate but highly ambivalent relationship to Judaism and Jewish mysticism, the connection between the Kabbalah and axiological ethics, and the role of the coincidence of opposites in mysticism, philosophy, and psychology.

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To the loving memory of my father,
Frank Ephraim Drob

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Preface

This work questions certain long-held philosophical and theological beliefs, amongst which are the assumptions that the insights of mystical experience are unavailable to human reason and inexpressible in linguistic terms, that either God does or does not exist, that "systematic theology" must provide a univocal account of God, man, and the world, that "theological and philosophical truth" is not continually subject to radical revision, and, more specifically, that the truth of propositions in philosophy and theology excludes the truth of their contradictions and contraries.

I have attempted to provide the general reader sufficient background in Jewish mysticism and postmodern thought to understand my approach to problems in theology, philosophy and psychology. That being said, this book cannot be regarded as an introductory text, as I have pursued the problems discussed herein to their limits, even in those instances where such pursuit has led to a level of complexity and abstraction that may strain the patience of the more casual reader. As will become clear in the course of my exposition I regard this work to be both a rational and a mystical one, and although its main ideas, in the end, turn out to be extraordinarily simple, the conceptual road to their simplicity is strewn with complexities necessitated by taking multiple perspectives on ideas, words and things, then taking multiple perspectives on the perspectives, and so on.

One of my goals in this book is to explore the boundaries between the linguistic and extra-linguistic in our understanding of language, God, and world, and in the process to retrace the logical and linguistic steps that originally led to multiplicity from its origins in a singular "One." The reader will bear with me if I must sojourn through certain complexities of language

and logic as a means of achieving my goal. As will become clear in the course of my exposition, I believe that Kabbalistic symbols, once they are passed through the filter of contemporary philosophy, are not only useful in addressing important philosophical and theological problems, but also lead to modes of understanding that are particularly suited to the intellectual and spiritual problems of our age. It is my hope that the reader will follow me far enough to enter into such forms of consciousness and apply them to his/her own life and work.

A work such as this, which has been many years in the making, has been subject to a myriad of influences, many of which the author is only dimly aware. My earliest debt is to my grandfather, Rabbi Max Drob, who, though he passed on when I was but a child was my first spiritual mentor, and whose life, writings, and spirit have continually served as an inspiration in my quest to forge a synthesis between Judaism and modern life.

I am greatly indebted to the radical Christian theologian, Thomas J. J. Altizer, under whose tutelage in the early 1970s I first became aware of the challenge that postmodern thought posed to traditional religious practice and belief, and who demonstrated to me the promise of such thinkers as Hegel, Nietzsche, Buber and Derrida for a contemporary theological vision. My understanding of Wittgenstein and the application of his notions of "language games" and "forms of life," to philosophy and psychology (and later to Jewish law and ritual) was initially guided by my mentor in philosophy at Cornell, Norman Malcolm. It was, however, another former student of Wittgenstein's, J. N. Findlay, who, serving as my dissertation advisor, led me out of the Wittgensteinian and deconstructive linguistic maze, and in doing so prompted me to look to mysticism as a valuable source for philosophical reflection. It was Findlay's works on Plato, Hegel, and Kant, and, moreover, his own "rational mystical" writings that I re-read concurrent with my studies of Chabad and Kabbalistic texts in the 1980s which prompted me to embark upon the long venture of forging a dialogue between the Kabbalah and the history of western thought. Findlay's inspiration is present in virtually all of my writing and thinking, I feel extremely fortunate to have encountered him in his final years of teaching at Boston University.

These acknowledgements would be incomplete without my profound thanks to Rabbi Shimon Hecht, who introduced me to the mystical philosophy of Chabad Judaism, and Rabbi Joel Kenney who led me painstakingly through portions of Chayyim Vital's classic Kabbalistic work,

Sefer Etz Chayyim, as well as through the writings of Moses Cordovero and others. I would also like to thank Rabbi Chayyim Nachman (Harvey) Gornish who served as my personal guide in the study of Jewish texts (*Tenach*, *Mishna*, *Midrash*) and Jewish law (*halakha*), and whose patience and dedication immeasurably enriched my understanding of *Yiddishkeit*, the Jewish tradition. More recently Rabbi Zali Abramowitz has selflessly guided me in the study of relevant portions of a number of Kabbalistic and Hasidic texts.

As in my previous books I am greatly indebted to the work of several recent and contemporary thinkers and scholars, including Gershom Scholem, Isaiah Tishby, Moshe Idel, Rachel Elior, Daniel Matt, Joseph Dan, and Elliot Wolfson, who have both made the teachings of the Kabbalists accessible to the modern reader, and who have provided me with insights into how these teachings might interface with contemporary philosophy and psychology. In addition, in this work, with its central focus upon Jacques Derrida, deconstruction and postmodernism, I am indebted to those such as Marc Taylor and John Caputo who have stimulated my own thinking on the theological implications of postmodern and deconstructive thought.

A special thanks to the editor of this series, Yudith Kornberg Greenberg, for her painstaking review of, and valuable suggestions regarding, the final manuscript.

Finally, dialogues with my wife, Dr. Liliana Rusansky Drob, who maintains a profound interest in Lacan and the French school of psychoanalysis, have stimulated my ideas about the role of language and the "extra-linguistic" in philosophy, psychology and theology.

Fifty years ago my grandfather lifted me high above his head, looked into my eyes, and then turning to my father (who had forsaken the rabbinate for a career in the stock market), said that he could see in my face that the rabbinical spirit had skipped a generation. While my family must still await the generation that will again take up the rabbinic mantle, I hope that in some small way I may have fulfilled my grandfather's prophesy and would receive his imprimatur.

Sanford L. Drob, Brooklyn, NY, September, 2008

Introduction

A Mysticism of Ideas

What Derrida told me, if I remember correctly, was that Levinas looked him in the eye and said, "Jacques, you know what you remind me of? A heretical Kabbalist of the 16th century! (Hillis Miller, June 12, 2007)

The present work explores the interface between Jewish mysticism and postmodern philosophy and theology. That there should be such an interface may be as surprising to some as it will be obvious to others. It is my hope that by articulating the numerous points of contact between the Kabbalah and the concerns of such 20th century thinkers as Derrida and Wittgenstein I will facilitate a dialogue that will further interest in the Kabbalah as a source for ideas in contemporary theology, philosophy and psychology.

In *Kabbalah and Postmodernism* I continue the task, begun in my previous books, *Symbols of the Kabbalah* and *Kabbalistic Metaphors*, of translating and transforming an age old symbolic mystical tradition into a rational theology and "mysticism of ideas." However, my goal in this work is not simply to translate Kabbalistic symbols and mystical insights into contemporary theology, philosophy, and psychology, but rather to uncover the modes of understanding implicit within Kabbalistic symbols that can contribute to a transformation of contemporary thinking in each of these fields. To this end I have placed the theosophical Kabbalah in an extended

dialogue with postmodern philosophy, with the expectation that neither the Kabbalah nor postmodern theology will emerge unchanged by this process.

I think of this book as an extended Kabbalistic meditation on a number of themes that are central to contemporary theology and philosophy. In contrast to my previous books, which detailed Kabbalistic theosophical symbols and explored their connections with several ancient and modern systems of thought, the present work is more directly involved in a form of *thinking* that I have come to regard as "Kabbalistic." My goal in this work is not so much to articulate a theological system, but rather to explore the very possibility of "theology" and "system" from a Kabbalistic point of view. My purpose is not to establish a theological doctrine or philosophical theory, but rather to engage in a form of rational/spiritual meditation that is informed by and lives within the spirit of both Jewish mysticism and contemporary thought. Such meditation might well be termed a form of intellective or rational mysticism. Through it I am not attempting to establish the existence of God, but rather to *reach toward God* via sustained reflection on certain theosophical and theological ideas. The process of writing this work and the ideas contained herein are thus, at least from a certain perspective, the author's meditation and prayer, in much the same way that a form of meditation and prayer was a major, if not the major, impetus to the theosophical Kabbalah of an earlier era.

While the symbols and ideas that form the basis of my reflection in this work derive from the Kabbalah of Isaac Luria and the interpretations of Luria's theosophy that have appeared in subsequent phases of Jewish mysticism (including those of the Hasidim and such twentieth century Kabbalah scholars as Scholem, Tishby and Idel), the material to which I apply these symbols ranges across an extremely wide span, from Bible, Midrash and Talmud to modern and post-modern criticism and philosophy. In previous works I have placed the Kabbalah into an extended dialogue with Hegel, Freud and Jung, and these earlier dialogues form an important background to the present work.[1]

Many of the following pages are concerned with the thought of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, and (to a somewhat lesser extent) with the thought of Ludwig Wittgenstein and Sigmund Freud. Each of these thinkers has not only continued to have an impact on the current intellectual scene, but each also represents a somewhat marginalized and "ghostly" presence of Judaism within the heart of contemporary thought. Both Freud and Derrida were Jews, and both embraced atheism only to find their

intellectual odyssey leading them into a profound reconsideration of their Jewish identities. Wittgenstein, who was of Jewish descent, grew up in a home in which Judaism was renounced in favor of Austrian culture, and his thought and life in many ways represented a sort of end-point in the assimilation process. Nevertheless, Wittgenstein held that below a seemingly hard and arid surface the Jew possesses the "molten lava of spirit and intellect."[2] Moreover, the kind of close philosophical and particularly linguistic analysis Wittgenstein engaged in, with its rhetorical questions and seeming adoption of contradictory positions, certainly bears the mark of Talmudic *pilpul* in the highest and most positive understanding of this term.[3]

In *Kabbalistic Metaphors* I argued that there is a close affinity between Kabbalah and Freud and that psychoanalysis can in many ways be profitably understood as a form of secularized Jewish mysticism.[4] A similar argument, can be made with respect to at least the later writings of Jacques Derrida; though under Derrida's principle that it is "impossible to determine what is an example of what" it would be moot as to whether deconstruction is a belated Kabbalism or Kabbalah an early form of deconstruction (for Derrida the same indeterminacy would also exist with respect to the relationship between the Kabbalah and Hegel, Freud or Jung). That Derrida himself was aware of the possibility of a Kabbalistic connection with his own work is clear from his *rejection* of Habermas' negatively, and Handelman's positively, toned insinuations that his work has strong affinities with the Jewish mystical tradition.[5] In this regard, an interesting anecdote was originally related to me by the radical Christian theologian Thomas Altizer, who in 2000 communicated the following:

> When I was introduced to Derrida by Hillis Miller, Hillis told the story of the last time he and Jacques had visited Levinas, and Levinas looked Jacques deep in his eyes, and said, "Jacques, you cannot deny that you are a contemporary embodiment of Lurianic Kabbalism."[6]

I subsequently emailed Miller, asking him about this story. In an email dated June 12, 2007. Miller wrote back, "What Derrida told me, if I remember correctly, was that Levinas looked him in the eye and said, "Jacques, you know what you remind me of? A heretical Kabbalist of the 16th century!"[7]

Derrida's own response to the charge of Jewish mysticism involved an unusually straightforward denial for a philosopher whose greatest concern has always been the opening up of new possibilities of interpretation:

> [...] at any rate, unfortunately or fortunately, as you like it, I am not mystical and there is nothing mystical in my work. In fact my work is a deconstruction of values which found mysticism, i.e. of presence, view, of the absence of a marque, of the unspeakable. If I say I am no mystic, particularly not a Jewish one as Habermas claims at one point, then I say that not to protect myself, but simply to state a fact. Not just that personally I am not mystical, but that I doubt whether anything I write has the least trace of mysticism.[8]

We will see that there is much in Derrida that is "Kabbalistic," and given Derrida's approving references to certain Kabbalistic ideas,[9] as well as his extended philosophical and personal meditations on such Jewish themes as circumcision[10] and the *tallith*,[11] it is hard to understand the force behind his disclaimer. However, it is not my purpose in this book to claim Derrida for Judaism or the Kabbalah, but rather to demonstrate that deconstruction and Kabbalah indeed share certain perspectives on language, philosophical foundations, "God", etc. and that that they often converge precisely in those areas where Jewish mysticism *departs* from the doctrines of both normative Judaism and other religious traditions.

While one of my goals in this work is to draw certain parallels between Kabbalah and postmodern philosophy, my purpose is not to simply draw connections between Kabbalah and contemporary thought, but rather to engage that thought Kabbalistically; to do, as it were Kabbalistic theology, and moreover to participate in a "new Kabbalistic tradition" that I believe has been evolving as a result of scholarly interest in the Kabbalah over the last 75 or so years. As such, many readers of this book may not immediately recognize the material I discuss here as Kabbalistic. One reason for this is that I have taken the Kabbalistic model of thought and hermeneutics which I evolved in my earlier books, and applied these to problems that were considered indirectly, if at all, in the traditional Kabbalistic texts. Some readers may thus be of the opinion that the reflections contained herein can hardly be termed "Kabbalah," at most granting that what I have endeavored to accomplish is a reading of certain issues in contemporary secular philosophy through a *quasi*-Kabbalistic lens, one that has been considerably reground with the tools of the western (as opposed to the "Jewish") philosophical tradition. I have no real quarrel with this view, but would argue that the question of what counts as "the Kabbalah" or "Jewish" is not anything that I or anyone else can or should decide *a priori*. The Zohar, the

locus classicus of the Kabbalah, was clearly influenced by "non-Jewish" ideas,[12] and contemporary scholars now recognize that early Jewish mysticism arose out of the interaction between biblical, Midrashic and Talmudic Judaism with Hellenistic thought.[13] I believe that my own work is a continuation of this *interactive* tradition, but I leave it to others to accept or reject my branding it with the term "Kabbalistic." In a sense what I propose to do in these pages is to iterate the symbols and terms of the Kabbalah in a new context; that of contemporary philosophy, where they are bound to take on new meanings. While there is no way of knowing in advance whether these meanings will end in a new form of life or a dead end, this is a question that the reader must resolve for him or herself.

Bilinear Thinking

Harold Bloom has pointed out that the Kabbalah overcomes the oppositions of, and thinks in ways that are not permitted by western metaphysics; the Kabbalah's God is both All and Nothing, total presence and total absence, its interiors all contain exteriors and "all of its effects determine its causes."[14] I will argue that to think Kabbalistically means to think "bilinearly" or "multi-linearly," that is, in at least two directions at once, so that, for example, at the same time that one is following a train of thought that shows human subjectivity to be the product of a material universe, one also follows a train of thought that shows the "material universe" to be the product of human consciousness and language, or to take another example, just as one recognizes that all "interpretations" rest upon an agreed upon, anchored "datum," one also recognizes that such a datum is itself the product of interpretations. In the course of such bilinear thinking one comes to realize that certain ideas which one had hitherto thought to be mutually exclusive are actually mutually supportive and interdependent. Further, one not only recognizes that such "*coincidentia oppositorum*" *are* the case, but also *why* they must be the case.

The reader will note that at many times during the course of my exposition I argue for a particular mystical or post-modernist point of view (e.g. a metaphysics of "perspectives" or the illusory nature of the ego). In each case it should be understood that such an argument is not made in order to establish a particular philosophical position, but rather to open up a new line of thinking, or redress an imbalance that a certain rigidity of thought has

brought about. In each case it should become clear that the pole of the philosophical dichotomy I appear to be defending is actually fully dependent on the truth of its opposite, the pole that, at least for the moment, I appear to have rejected or ignored. While, I think that one can actually come to think bilinearly, actual spoken or written philosophical discourse is always linear and, at least temporarily, unidirectional. I am in agreement with Derrida, Wittgenstein and others who have held that such unidirectional discourse has imprisoned us in a metaphysics in which one aspect of language, the world, consciousness, etc. is always privileged over the other. In this book I attempt to use the very form of (rational, philosophical) discourse that has imprisoned us to provide us with a way out of our confinement. While my goal in this book is akin to the Wittgensteinian objective of "releasing the fly from the fly bottle," unlike Wittgenstein I am not of the belief that once released the fly will no longer be interested in metaphysics and philosophy. On the contrary, it is my view that once released from the captivity of "unilinear," "dichotomous," "privileging" thought, we will not abandon metaphysics but rather be open to doing it in a new light, one that is illuminated by such multilinear Kabbalistic notions as *Ayin* (Nothingness), *Ein-sof* (Without-end), *Tzimtzum* (Concealment/Contraction) *Sefirot* (Archetypes), *Shevirat ha-Kelim* (Breaking of the Vessels) and *Tikkun ha-Olam* (the Restoration of the World).

When one finds oneself laboring over, or involved in a discussion concerning some theological or religious question, e.g. whether God exists, or if there is life after death, one is in all likelihood thinking in a dichotomous linear fashion, in which there are two ideas which seem to be on opposite sides of a great divide, only one side of which can possibly contain the "truth." There are powerful forces that act to keep one focused on the question in precisely this linear, polar way. These forces are linguistic, epistemological and psychological. One can only represent one thought at a time, both verbally and cognitively. Further, one wants a clear answer; one doesn't want, for example, to be told that the very manner in which one has framed the question misleads one into falsely believing that an either/or answer can be forthcoming. One doesn't want to hear that God both does *and* does not exist (or, as Wittgenstein once provocatively put it, that "he half exists"[15]) or that there is both life after death and a complete termination of all consciousness and identity with the demise of one's body. One doesn't want to hear (as the Buddha is purported to have responded to the question of whether there is personal immortality) that one's question "does not even

refer to the case." In spite of this natural resistance, in these pages I arrive at a form of thinking in which the answers "both and none" to our original theological inquiries make perfectly good sense; a form of thinking within which the either/or dichotomies of traditional theology are seen as a misleading consequence of a limiting perspective inevitably created by language. I will show that there is much within the Kabbalah to lead us to the view that our dichotomous philosophical and theological ideas are limiting instances of a more complex circular whole in which each pole of each dichotomy is actually dependent upon the truth or inclusion (as opposed to the exclusion) of its opposite.

One of the problems of linear thought is that it understands deep theological questions such as the existence of God, or the immortality of the soul, as though they were somehow straightforward empirical questions that can be answered from *within a familiar framework of understanding*, like questions of the sort "Are there any more saber tooth tigers?" We don't consider the possibility that even after amassing all the "data" necessary to answer our question we might still not be in a position to provide a straightforward (i.e. singular) answer. This is because the very linguistic and conceptual framework that we initially thought was adequate for posing our question is itself responsible for the misleading belief that we must make a unique, definitive response.

I think that fundamental theological questions, such as those pertaining to the existence of God, the immortality of the soul, etc. result from the linear/dichotomous thinking conditioned by our forms of representation. The Kabbalah challenges such linear/dichotomous thinking and suggests a more inclusive mode of thought that leads us to understand that our questions should no longer be understood in an either/or light. One of my goals in this book is to indicate, in at least a general way, how and why this is the case.

Throughout this book, I endeavor to show how each of the main Kabbalistic symbols embodies an important philosophical or experiential antinomy and, when fully understood, a movement towards that antinomy's "resolution". Such resolution does not, however, eliminate the antinomy but rather permits us to think and live it without experiencing a sense of "fatal contradiction." For example, with the symbol of the *Sefirot*, the Kabbalists articulate and seek to resolve the opposition between the simple unity of the Absolute and the apparent multiplicity of the world (the classical problem of "the one" and "the many"); in the symbol of the *Kellipot* (Husks) the Kabbalists articulate and attempt to resolve the antinomy between good and

evil; in *Tzimtzum,* the chasm between being and nothingness; in *Adam Kadmon* (Primordial Man), the distance between God and man, and in the symbol of *Tikkun ha-Olam* (the Restoration of the World), the antinomy between theism (God created man) and atheism (man created God). Indeed, each of the Kabbalistic symbols can be understood as emerging dialectically, as a higher order sublation of an opposition (or contradiction) between traditional philosophical ideas, and, hence, as a "resolution" to a traditional philosophical problem. For example, the problem of theodicy (of reconciling evil with the existence of God) takes on a different face once we speak the language of the Lurianic Kabbalah, as it will enable us to see that what we call "evil" is woven into the very fabric of both creation (*Tzimtzum)* and redemption (*Tikkun*), the ultimate "goods."[16]

So conceived, the Kabbalah organizes experience for us in a new way, one that transcends the traditional categories of philosophy, and further, which cuts across the various disciplines (e.g., philosophy, psychology, theology, ethics and hermeneutics) that have addressed themselves to the human condition. If one is to understand the Kabbalah, one must stop thinking in terms of the traditional distinctions altogether. For example, the process of *Tikkun ha-Olam*, in which individuals are enjoined to "raise the sparks" of divine light which inhere within their souls and the world, is at once a psychological, theological, ethical, political and mystical act. Such distinctions, though perhaps useful in an initial approach to the Kabbalah, are ultimately like the ladders, described by Wittgenstein, which fall away once their purpose has been served.[17]

Rational Mysticism

One of the chief goals of this work is to demonstrate that certain perspectives on "reality" and "truth" that had hitherto been thought of as the exclusive province of *mystical experience* (both within Judaism and other traditions) are accessible to rational reflection, in part via the "bi-linear" thinking that is one of the modes of understanding that emerge from the theosophical Kabbalah. This claim is explored in Chapter 6 where I describe how a consideration of the Kabbalistic doctrine of *coincidentia oppositorum* gives rise to a "rational mysticism" that complements the experiential mysticisms of Judaism and other spiritual traditions.

Commencing from the Kabbalistic/Hasidic notions (1) that *Ein-sof*, the Infinite, is the union of all oppositions and contradictions, (2) that the world is an expression of multiple polarities and distinctions that are ultimately contained in and return to the divine "One," and (3) that language is the vehicle of differentiation, multiplicity and finitude, I argue that the inexpressible unity of all things commonly reported by mystical adepts represents the intuition of a singular, unitary plenum, prior to its being sundered into polarities and difference by the word-thing (signifier-signified) distinction. While the world as it is experienced through and described by language is necessarily finite, multiple, and polarized, there nonetheless remains a trace or "echo" of the original pre-linguistic unity that is intuitable *within* language. This "echo" is evident in the *coincidentia oppositorum* (the logical interdependence of opposites) that can be shown to exist between the opposing concepts (the "antinomies") of thought, particularly those that are evident in philosophy, theology, and psychology. Such contrasting pairs as idealism and materialism, essentialism and nominalism, free-will and determinism, fact-based science and hermeneutics, instead of naming incommensurable philosophical positions, are understood as pairs of fully interdependent ideas. Through an understanding of the conceptual interdependence of ideas that are ordinarily thought to be mutually exclusive (e.g. theism and atheism, faith and disbelief, everything and nothing) we can figuratively "listen to the echo" of the primal unity that was sundered by logic and language, and rationally reverse the creative/concealment process (in Lurianic terms, the *Tzimtzum*) that gives rise to finitude, difference and multiplicity.

I will focus, in particular, on certain fundamental oppositions that are wrought by (and foundational for) language itself, most importantly the signifier/signified distinction, the distinction between words and things. Drawing upon ideas originating in Wittgenstein and Derrida I will argue that the distinction between words and things is *both* philosophically untenable *and* absolutely essential, and that that the second order distinction between the views (1) that the signifier/signified distinction is untenable, and (2) that this very distinction is indispensable, is itself a *coincidentia oppositorum*, i.e. that we could not assert (1) without assuming the truth of (2) and vice versa. When we recognize the logical interdependence of these ideas, and with this the logical interdependence of many other philosophical and theological ideas that we had hitherto thought to be mutually exclusive, we have

figuratively walked up the first rungs on the ladder of rational mystical ascent.

Kabbalistic Forms of Consciousness

The "coincidence of opposites" is a basic "form of consciousness" to emerge out of our consideration of the Kabbalistic symbols. However, several other forms of consciousness and modes of understanding will emerge from our philosophical and theological reflection upon Lurianic symbols and ideas. Amongst these are (1) the complete "open economy" of thought, (2) the infinite interpretability of text and world, (3) "not-knowing" and "the impossible" as basic modes of thought and being, (4) concealment and contraction as modes of creation and insight, (5) the shattering of all foundations of thought and experience, (6) creativity as a basic structure of human (and divine) consciousness, (7) language as the boundary of thought, which nonetheless requires its own transcendence, and (8) the dissolution of personal identity and the structures of the self. Each of these forms of consciousness/modes of understanding will occupy us in at least one of the chapters of this work. They will, however, be presented with the understanding that they each exist in *coincidentia oppositorum* with their apparent contraries, and are therefore not to be taken as final or absolute. Two additional forms of consciousness, essential to a contemporary iteration of the Kabbalah, involve a recognition of (9) the omnipresence of value, and the importance of (10) restoration, emendation and repair (*Tikkun*) as a fundamental mode of human being-in-the-world. These ideas serve as a background for this work, but will not be dealt with at any length. This is both because these axiological forms of consciousness are fundamental to the broader Jewish tradition (of which the Kabbalah is merely a part) and because to detail a Jewish-Kabbalistic theory of value would require an entire work unto itself, a task that I hope to undertake in the future.

The Philosophical Status of the Kabbalists' Basic Metaphor

I have previously argued that the myth adumbrated by the theosophical Kabbalah, in particular the Kabbalah of Isaac Luria, is a "basic metaphor," one that provides a comprehensive account, explanation or rationale for all

experience, and all things. In short, the Lurianic Kabbalah purports to provide the very sort of thing that postmodern thought in general, and Derrida in particular, regarded to be impossible. While I have held that the metaphor of the Lurianic Kabbalah is "basic" in a sense akin to the grand metaphors of Hegel and earlier metaphysicians, I have not claimed exclusivity for it. In fact, in *Symbols of the Kabbalah* I held that the Lurianic theosophy is one basic metaphor amongst many others, and that its appeal lay not so much in its claim to absolute truth, but rather in its comprehensiveness, non-triviality, ethical value, etc. In that sense it is *one* world-hypothesis, *one* creative way of looking at the world. The Lurianic Kabbalah as I described it in my previous work would then be one grand vision, one "symphony of ideas" amongst an indeterminate number of others.

However, several considerations point to the conclusion that the Lurianic Kabbalah is potentially wider in its implications than other basic metaphors of the past. Amongst these considerations, which I detailed in *Symbols of the Kabbalah* and *Kabbalistic Metaphors*, is that the metaphor of creation/dissolution/re-creation, embodied in the Lurianic dynamic of *Sefirot*/*Shevirah*/*Tikkun* (as well as in many of the details of the Lurianic system) has appeared and reappeared in various guises throughout the history of ancient and modern thought. Of course, the existence of a perennial philosophy is no guarantee of its validity or truth, as history has repeatedly proven that delusion is often much more widespread than insight. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the basic myth of the Lurianic Kabbalah does appear to correspond to certain routes or archetypes of the human mind. Further, I have argued that the Lurianic metaphors correspond to fundamental patterns of psychological development, scientific progress, and dramatic narrative. I have detailed the first two of these correspondences in my book *Symbols of the Kabbalah*, and will discuss the third in Chapter One of the present volume.

Perhaps more importantly, unlike other basic metaphors, the validity of the Lurianic theosophy is not undermined by the argument that it itself is a *historical narrative constructed* by humankind. This is because *constructing/creating* history, the world, God, and narratives about each of these, is precisely what the Lurianic Kabbalah is about! Collectively, the Lurianic symbols provide a narrative in which humanity, the world and divinity are in a continual process of creation, deconstruction, reconstruction and redemption, while the Lurianic narrative itself is subject to a similar "revisionary" process. Further, in opposition to dogmatic theology, the

Lurianic Kabbalah recognizes that both god and the world, like scripture, are subject to an indefinite if not infinite variety of interpretations, and that such infinite interpretability does not undermine, but rather provides the context for the world's redemption (*Tikkun*).

Thus, in contrast to many if not all overarching interpretations of the cosmos, Lurianic Kabbalah is an *open system*, one that is itself subject to continual revision, and which is inclusive of multiple points of view on reality. In fact, the Lurianic Kabbalah, through its doctrine of the "Breaking of the Vessels," provides the rationale and means for *its own negation and transcendence*. Further, the Lurianic theosophy, through its celebration of the world's diversity, and its adherence to the doctrine of *coincidentia oppositorum*, is consistently open to that which it might initially appear to exclude. For example, we will that certain Kabbalists embrace *both* the notion that God created man and man creates God, and the Lurianic Kabbalah suggests that these ideas are interdependent. The Lurianic metaphors of *Tzimtzum, Sefirot, Shevirah* and *Tikkun* offer a model for dialectics in general, one in which the unanticipated, the negative, the broken, and the totally other, is made part of an all encompassing but *as-yet-undefined*, whole.

While the Lurianic theosophy is in many ways commensurate with the philosophy of Hegel (the system of thought which according to many postmodernists is the culmination of and proof of the failure of western metaphysics), there is a crucial difference between Hegel's Absolute and the Lurianist's, *Ein-sof*. Hegel, in spite of an apparent openness to all perspectives, ends up privileging a series of events and ideas: Idealism, Christianity, Philosophy, Germany, the West, etc. Hegel could do this because he believed that the dialectic had in fact come to an end in his own time, indeed *in his own mind*. For Hegel, the Absolute was not something to be expected *in the future*, but was something that was already present, embodied in his system, in European culture and history. Hegel's system became a closed one, with the result that for him the Absolute simply came to be identified with Hegelian philosophy. The Lurianic theosophy, on the other hand, as a Jewish phenomenon, is identified with *a messiah that is yet to come*, and its dialectic need not be subject to an artificial closure. Indeed, the Kabbalah remains open to an as yet undefined future. Y.H. Yerushalmi had written in *Freud's Moses*, that "being open to the future, that is being a Jew"[18] and Derrida, in his commentary of Yerushalmi's work writes:

> The affirmation of the future to come…the "yes," insofar as it is the condition of all promises of all hope, of all awaiting, of all performativity, of all opening toward the future, whatever it may be for science or for religion. I am prepared to subscribe without reserve to this affirmation made by Yerushalmi.[19]

Deconstruction provided a general dialectical model for the end of the 20th century just as Hegel's philosophy provided such a model for the 19th. Opposed to the absolutism of Hegel, deconstruction nevertheless makes use of a dialectical method, in its constant discovery of what is opposed, negated, and marginalized in all that is declared to be true and whole. However, the deconstructive dialectic does not come to an arbitrary (or other) end, and deconstruction has conscientiously eschewed all efforts at systematization and metaphysics. The result is that in contrast to Hegelianism, deconstruction provides us with critique, but nothing resembling a world-view or guide for life. For this reason, many have found deconstruction unsatisfying, nihilistic and even immoral in its implications.[20] The Lurianic Kabbalah is, I believe, s system that can remain open in the deconstructive sense, without surrendering its efforts to provide (an albeit) tentative *weltanschauung*. It does so through its multiperspectivism, its various *coincidentias*, and its openness to a (messianic) future.

Kabbalah, Deconstruction, Hegelianism

In my previous books I have drawn attention to the important correspondence between Kabbalistic theosophy and Hegelian philosophy.[21] It will be worth our while to pause for a moment and consider in a bit more depth the connection between postmodernism and Hegelian philosophy, and the relationship of each to the Kabbalah. Derrida and the postmodernists share with Hegel a keen interest in dichotomies and oppositions, and typically adopt the Hegelian view that the poles of such oppositions can neither remain pure nor exclude their opposites. Indeed part of Derrida's deconstructive task is to show that certain ideas (e.g. absolute presence) contain as part of themselves precisely what they are meant to exclude (in our example, absence, past and future), and that the dichotomies that have been foundational for western metaphysics, including essence and accident, subject and object, fact and interpretation, and inside and outside, are each subject to a critique through which their perceived contrasts are discovered to

be contained within themselves. However, having gone this distance with Hegel, Derrida is adamant that deconstruction stops short of the Hegelian effort to synthesize new overarching concepts, which absorb the interdependence of oppositions and eventually lead to an Absolute, which is the truth of all things. Derrida makes it clear that he regards Hegel's move towards such "totalization" a ruse, one that is both metaphysically and ethically suspect. Yet he realizes that any effort to contradict Hegel will in the end be just more grist for the Hegelian mill, which transforms all opposition into just another negative moment in the synthetic process.[22] Derrida thus acknowledges that trying to refute Hegel is akin to trying to slay the mythical Hydra; when one head is cut off, several grow in its place. Indeed, Derrida goes so far as to suggest that *thought* itself cannot escape the Hegelian dialectic, i.e. that we cannot defeat Hegel by *thinking*. For Derrida, if one desires to burn Hegel, one must also consume the fire (thought, philosophy) as well.[23] In *Glas*, Derrida goes so far as to announce the death of the distinction between the signified and signifier, on the grounds that this distinction is based on a false opposition between language and the world, perhaps suggesting that this is the sort of radical move that is needed in order to escape Hegel's Absolute. Yet, in other places, Derrida readily acknowledges that one could not think, speak or write without this very (false) distinction. To defeat the Hegelian dialectic, it seems one would have to, in effect, 'fall silent,' stop speaking and thinking altogether.

It is thus unclear whether Derrida actually offers an *argument* against the Hegelian Absolute, or whether he is simply repulsed by it for other, perhaps ethical or political reasons; for example, on the grounds that in its effort to overcome difference, it makes western, indeed German metaphysics, the final word in philosophy and history, and thereby serves as a vehicle to undermine the power of substantive political change. For Derrida, the Hegelian Absolute is supposed to be inclusive of all things and all perspectives, but it results in the dissolution of difference, and the belittling of all 'other' (in Hegel's view 'partial') perspectives. Derrida writes "If there were a definition of différance it would be precisely the limiting, the interruption, and the destruction of the Hegelian dialectic everywhere it operates."[24]

According to Derrida, Hegel believes that he will receive a return of "significance and meaning" on all of his metaphysical speculations, and that in the end everything can be made to *make sense*. Derrida tells us that for Hegel all can be rendered meaningful because there is nothing *other* than

meaning. For Derrida, however, there is always something that exceeds meaning, and from which one cannot expect a metaphysical "return." In contrast to Hegel, Derrida argues for a general or open economy of language, one in which significance can never be fully circumscribed. The Hegelian *Aufhebung* (lifting up) cannot lift up, negate and then conserve for its own purposes, the *trace*, which is the excess of meaning beyond simple presence.

As I have shown elsewhere, the Hegelian dialectic was both *anticipated* by the Kabbalah of Isaac Luria, and can be *marshaled* to provide the basis for a contemporary philosophical reading of the Lurianic Kabbalah.[25] I believe that the opposition between Hegelianism and postmodernism is not nearly as strong as Derrida would suppose, and if one eliminates or ignores certain (at times fatal) prejudices and inconsistencies in the application of Hegel's own philosophical method,[26] Hegel's thought still provides a foundation for a systematic philosophy/theology that is both deeply respectful of difference, and open to its own transcendence. As Mark Taylor writes: "contrary to common opinion, Hegel is not a philosopher of identity, for whom difference is either penultimate or epiphenomenal... [For Hegel] instead of identity dissipating difference, difference constitutes identity... To the extent that Hegel refuses to reduce difference to identity, he anticipates one of the most important points repeatedly advanced in deconstructive philosophy and criticism."[27]

Deconstruction, in Taylor's view, actually proposes a "return to Hegel." For Hegel, it is only via a sojourn through the historical and the specific that the Absolute comes to realize itself. The problem is that Hegel tends to privilege certain ideas, historical eras, and cultures, and is thus guilty of the very marginalization and disregard for the differences that his dialectical philosophy ought to fully embrace. Taylor observes that Hegel tends to "slip back" into the very position he is criticizing, especially in his claims for Absolute knowledge. I would argue that the dialectic can be better conceived as a *refusal* of such absolute knowledge, as a radical critique of any position that seems to be at rest or regard itself as a final interpretation. A true Hegelian "Absolute" would, paradoxically, never achieve a final perfection, but would, like the Kabbalist's *Ein-sof*, be continually in the process of creation and emendation; indefinitely self-critical and changing to accommodate the "new."

Towards a Contemporary Kabbalistic Theology

Through my reading of the Lurianic system within the context of contemporary thought I have endeavored to formulate a theology that is relevant to our times. A major tenet of this work is that Kabbalistic theosophy, which provides a mythical account of God, the elements of creation, humanity, and the purpose of existence, anticipates, and is highly compatible with, the relativistic, perspectivist, anti-foundational sensibility of postmodernism, and further, that the Kabbalah is able to adopt and integrate precisely those postmodernist ideas (multi-culturalism, multi-perspectivism, non-foundationalism, philosophical relativism, and even *atheism*) that have traditionally been thought to be antithetical to a religious or theological world-view. A major tenet of Jewish mystical thought is that God, the world, and humankind are conditioned by, and are ultimately a union of, opposite, even contradictory notions and ideas, and it therefore should come as no surprise that a *Kabbalistic theology* should itself rest upon ideas that theologians would typically exclude.

As I have already warned, readers of this volume, particularly those who have been exposed on the one hand to traditional accounts of Jewish mysticism, or on the other hand to contemporary "new age" presentations, may find the Kabbalah I describe rather unfamiliar and even a bit unsettling. The Kabbalah, like any great spiritual and textual tradition, is multi-layered and multi-textured, and those who come to it will inevitably focus upon one or more of its aspects, while de-emphasizing and even ignoring others. Although in practice the Kabbalah cannot be neatly divided into aspects, for our present purposes, it will be convenient to articulate five general strata of Kabbalistic literature, even if in the actual texts these strata inevitably intermingle and are conditioned by one another:

(1) Philosophical and general theoretical aspects of the Kabbalah, in which the Kabbalists proclaim, for example, that there are an infinite number of readings and interpretations of any given moment or text, that the absolute, *Ein-sof*, is a union of all contradictions, or that the world is itself comprised of "letters in the holy tongue." Such general, abstract pronouncements are frequent enough within Kabbalistic literature as to constitute the basis of a Kabbalistic philosophy (as opposed to theosophy), and will form the basis for much that is discussed in this book.

(2) Theosophical aspects of the Kabbalah, in which *Ein-sof* (the Infinite), the *Sefirot* (divine archetypes), and various higher and lower worlds are described, and the reciprocal impact of these worlds and man's soul are adumbrated. Such theosophical descriptions can be taken more or less literally or interpreted philosophically and psychologically. While philosophical and psychological interpretations of Kabbalistic theosophy do not exhaust their significance, the main direction of the present work is to view such theosophical symbols as *Ein-sof* (The Infinite), *Tzimtzum* (Divine Contraction), *Sefirot* (Divine Archetypes), *Otiyot Yesod* (Foundational Letters), *Shevirat ha-Kelim* (The Breaking of the Vessels) and *Tikkun ha-Olam* (The Restoration of the World) in philosophical and psychological terms.

(3) Mystical and theurgic aspects of the Kabbalah, i.e. descriptions of mystical cleaving or union with the divine, as well as the techniques that enable one to achieve such union. These techniques are said by the Kabbalists to both create an exalted state in the mystical adept, and to have a critical (theurgic) impact upon the divine realm, redressing imbalances and schisms within the cosmic order. These aspects of the Kabbalah will also play a role (if not a central one) in the present work, one goal of which is to attempt to understand such mystical experience within the context of a non-absolutist Kabbalistic theology.

(4) Biblical, midrashic and halakhic (Jewish legal) references. These constitute a very large, if not the largest, strata within many Kabbalistic texts. The theosophical entities that populate the Kabbalistic universe are allegorically and symbolically related to biblical figures, stories and events, are understood as providing a rationale for the various *mitzvoth* (commandments), or are considered within the context of Jewish ritual and prayer. From a traditional, Jewish point of view, it is this stratum of the Kabbalah that is in many ways closest to the main body of Judaism and is thus often emphasized. While the Kabbalah originates within and is integrally connected with Jewish religion, culture, literature, and law, the emphasis in the present work will be on those aspects of the Kabbalah that provide the foundation for a general theology, spirituality and ethic. While such a general theology must be expressed in a particular idiom, the major thrust of the present work is to articulate

those ideas that make the Kabbalah a universal rather than a particular theological discourse.

(5) Ideas, superstitions, beliefs and practices that from a contemporary point of view are historically and culturally bound, and which do not readily translate into a universal idiom. Examples of such ideas are Isaac Luria's prescriptions for particular penitence with regard to sexual offenses, or his practice of *metoposcopy*, the interpretation of Hebrew letters that presumably appear on the forehead of individuals and the presence or absence of which is said to reveal that the individual has performed or neglected certain *mitzvoth*. While such ideas, beliefs and "superstitions" are not necessarily excluded from a contemporary philosophical (and particularly psychological) approach to the Kabbalah, they are treated rather sparingly in this book.

The present work treats each of these five Kabbalistic strata, but emphasizes the first three, paying less attention to the last two. Traditional Kabbalists have varied in their emphases, some focusing on the theosophical aspects (2), others on the ecstatic (experiential) aspects of Kabbalistic doctrine (3), and still others on the halakhic/midrashic (4), or practical/magical (5) aspects of Kabbalistic thought. Most contemporary popular accounts tend to focus upon these experiential, mythological and practical aspects of the Kabbalah. In contrast, the purely philosophical or theoretical aspects of the Kabbalah (1) have generally not been emphasized by the traditionalists, the popularizers, or the academicians.

My goal in this work is to pass the Kabbalah through the matrix of postmodern thought and in doing so to "extract the philosophical and theological gold" that is dispersed within the sources of Jewish mysticism. My belief is that such a passage is needed, not only because of the strong affinity between the Kabbalah and postmodernism, but because postmodern thought (which can be said to have begun with Nietzsche's declaration of the "death of God") poses one of the strongest challenges to traditional theology. A Kabbalistic theology that survives passage through the gates of postmodern thought will thus be one that is far more able to sustain the intellectual and psychological challenges of the contemporary world.