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MYSTICISM, MAGIC AND KABBALAH IN ASHKENAZI JUDAISM

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AND
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Introduction

The Conference on Jewish Mysticism, Magic and Kabbalah in Ashkenazi Judaism, which met in Frankfurt a.M. in December 1991, was the Fifth International Conference on the History of Jewish Mysticism in Memory of Gershom Scholem. It was the first such conference to meet outside of Jerusalem, and the first to be dedicated to a geographical region rather than a historical period. The first four conferences in this series were convened in Jerusalem, in the halls of the Israel Academy of Sciences and the Humanities; Gershom Scholem was president of the Academy for many years. They were dedicated, in a chronological progression, to four key periods in the history of Jewish mysticism: The first concentrated on ancient Jewish mysticism, the Hekhalot and Merkabah literature; the second - to the beginnings of Jewish mysticism in medieval Europe; the third - to the Age of the Zohar, and the fourth - the Kabbalah in Safed and the Lurianic Kabbalah. Proceedings of these four conferences were published in Jerusalem, as volumes in the *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought*, between 1986 and 1993. All the conferences were convened, in two-years intervals, near the date of Gershom Scholem's death, February 21st (1982).

This time, the two-years interval was not observed, and the Fifth Conference met less than a year after the previous one. The Fourth conference, on Safed and Luria, met in Jerusalem in February 1991, during the Gulf War, when Israel was under attack by missiles from Iraq. It was an unusually successful conference - all the participants stayed throughout the lectures and debates, sitting with their gas masks on the table in front of them, and had nowhere else to go - all public activities and institutions having been suspended, and the Conference was 'the only show in town'. Despite the situation, the participants invited from the United States and Europe arrived safely and took part in the conference. This can be taken as an indication of the continued vitality and meaning of Gershom Scholem's revolutionary scholarly achievements: during the tenth year after his death, three such conferences were convened, in Jerusalem, in Frankfurt and the sixth, in Berlin (February 1992); all of them had well-defined subjects, full schedules, lively debates, and all their Proceedings were published in volumes which include detailed studies of central subjects concerning the history of Jewish mysticism.

The Frankfurt Conference, the only one among the six dedicated to a region, expressed the intensification of interest in the history of Jewish

mysticism in Germany and central Europe, the area known in Hebrew as 'Ashkenaz'. Some of the major developments which marked the emergence of Jewish mysticism in Europe in its various schools and tendencies occurred in Germany in the late twelfth and during the thirteenth century. After that, this area did not cease to be one of the centers of Jewish mystical creativity. Even when the main centers of Jewish mystical schools were in the Provence and in Spain, in Italy, in the Ottoman Empire and in *Erez Yisrael*, in Eastern Europe and elsewhere, there were always connections with groups and schools in Germany. Every major development elsewhere had an impact, an echo, or further development, in the German realm.

The history of Jewish mysticism, even though its centers moved from 'sefardi' to 'ashkenazi' realms and back, was never exclusively 'sefardi' or 'ashkenazi'. Scores of important and influential Jewish mystics moved from 'sefardi' to 'ashkenazi' cultural realms and vice versa, carrying with them their local traditions, teachings and insights. Thus, the history of Jewish mysticism in Ashkenaz includes all the major themes and all the meaningful phenomena of Jewish mysticism as a whole.

Almost half of the lectures delivered on the conference, and the studies presented in this volume, relate fully or in part to one of the most meaningful aspects of Jewish mystical creativity during the Middle Ages: The circles of the Ashkenazi Hasidim, or Jewish pietism in Medieval Germany, which flourished mainly in the second half of the twelfth century and during the thirteenth. This phenomenon, first comprehensively presented in the third chapter of Gershom Scholem's *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, is different from all other cultural developments in Judaism in the Middle Ages by being centered in Germany, and reflecting the specific circumstances and cultural characteristics of the Jews in central Europe. Its main schools and circles were in the Rhineland, but it spread, on the one hand, east to the German heartland and to Bohemia and further east, and on the other - to northern France. It is the most prominent 'Ashkenazi' spiritual development in an era in which most of Jewish creativity in the spiritual realms was centered in southern Europe, in the Provence, Spain, Italy, Northern Africa, Egypt, Byzantium and *Erez Yisrael*. The writings of the circles of these esoterics, mystics and pietists which are grouped, rather inaccurately, under the title of 'Ashkenazi Hasidism' remain still, to a large extent, in manuscripts. In the last two decades several treatises were published in traditional, inaccurate editions. The Ashkenazi Hasidic heritage had a lasting impact on Ashkenazi-Jewish culture in the following centuries, becoming one of the characteristics of this culture, and some of its ideas, symbols and methodologies were integrated in the Kabbalah and became an integral part of Kabbalistic traditions up to modern times.

The Frankfurt conference, and the volume presented here, is especially important, because of the complete absence of this meaningful phenomenon

from the history of religious cultures in medieval Germany as presented in contemporary scholarship. It seems that most scholars in this field are not aware even of its existence, and no attempt has been made to integrate it within the comprehensive presentations of mysticism and piety in central Europe in the High Middle Ages. The material concerning Ashkenazi Hasidism is extant mainly in Hebrew; almost no text has been translated into German (or English, though a French translation of the *Sefer Hasidim* has been published recently), and most of the scholarly work in this field has been done in Hebrew. In the last few years a very modest change seems to be occurring, one of its expressions being the inclusion of this subject in the Proceedings of a previous conference in Frankfurt, dedicated to Jewish culture and history in Germany (edited by K. E. Grözinger[1]). There is some reason to believe that today historians of Medieval Germany are more aware of the Jewish aspect of their subject, and are willing to include it in their studies, in contradiction to the prevailing attitude before, during and after the Nazi regime and the Holocaust. There are very few books written in Germany in the High Middle Ages which reflect in such detail and intensity the life and culture of the period, social and economic structures and conventions, popular and intellectual beliefs, customs and relationships, attitudes towards minorities and gender, concepts of education and of property, and many other subjects, like the *Sefer Hasidim*. Despite the deep gulf separating Jews and Christians in this period, which followed immediately - and reflected - the persecutions and massacres of the period of the crusades - Jews and Christians did live together in dozens of towns in Germany, and even the contradictions reflected historical reality and cultural trends. Any separation between the study of these communities severely cripples historical understanding of both of them. Attempts by scholars in Jewish studies to integrate the study of Jewish culture in Germany in the Middle Ages within the parallel developments in German society as a whole were partial and sporadic, and did not lead to a comprehensive understanding; from the other side, it seems, even such incomplete endeavors are missing. It is hoped that this conference, and this volume, will contribute, however modestly, to increase interest in this subject among the scholarly community in Germany and enhance the possibility of the emergence of truely balanced and correct historical studies of this period and this subject.

The studies in this volume survey some chapters of the history of Kabbalah in Germany from the thirteenth century onwards, and several other studies deal with one of the most traumatic, and historically meaningful, off-shoots of Jewish mysticism: the messianic movement of Shabbatianism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This cataclysmic event, which was centered in the Ottoman empire, began a century and a half of turmoil and

[1] *Judentum im deutschen Sprachraum*, Frankfurt a.M. 1991.

controversy, which reached and divided Jewish intellectuals and mystics in several Jewish centers in Germany. The intense messianic awakening in this period met and clashed with the increasing interest of Jews in the German culture around them, and in the eighteenth century Germany was the scene in which the most dynamic and vibrant elements of Jewish tradition were in constant conflict with the emerging movement of the Jewish enlightenment. The radical heretic Frankist movement had its center in Germany at the same time that the most important works of Moses Mendelssohn and other enlightenment thinkers were written there.

In the nineteenth century, while Eastern Europe was engulfed by the schism between the new Hasidic movement and its opponents, both of them representing new phases in the development of Jewish mysticism, German Jewry began the scholarly study of the Kabbalah. Attitudes towards Jewish mysticism differed categorically: in the 1840s Heinrich Graetz began to publish a series of studies of ancient and medieval Jewish mystical works, motivated by a definite negative attitude towards this phenomenon, and at the same time a young scholar, M. H. Landauer, was so engulfed by the mystical works of Abraham Abulafia and other mystics whose writings he read in the manuscript libraries, that he became a mystic himself. During the next half-century, the rationalistic and critical attitude towards the mystical aspect of Judaism increased, and when Gershom Scholem started his scholarly enterprise in the second decade of the twentieth century it was the established attitude, with few exceptions.

Gershom Scholem represents, to a very large extent, the combination and fusion of the two conflicting attitudes towards Jewish mysticism which marked nineteenth-century German Jewry: In his rebellious character, he contradicted the norms of the surrounding society and developed a deep empathy towards the Hebrew language and Jewish tradition, including the Kabbalah, attitudes which led him to adopt Zionism and to immigrate to *Erez Yisrael*. On the other hand, he was completely integrated in the critical, scholarly concepts of the historical-philological schools of the European academic world and the scholarly studies of the Wissenschaft des Judentums school. He criticized their enmity to the mystical aspect of Judaism in the harshest terms, but used their methodologies in order to establish a historical, precise picture of the development of the various traditions of Jewish mystical creativity. This fusion did not develop easily: whem Scholem began his work he was so influenced by the mystical treatises he was studying that he accepted, with reservations, the Kabbalists' own view of the antiquity of their traditions. Only gradually did he adopt a more rigorous historical approach, which enabled him to identify the medieval character of most Kabbalistic traditions. He thus moved from writing based on faith to a reliance on textual and historical analysis, rejecting Kabbalistic orthodoxy, and laying the foundation for modern scholarship in the field of Jewish mysticism.

The centrality of Ashkenaz both in the history of Jewish mysticism and in the study of the subject in the last century and a half justify the insistance on including Germany in the contemporary map of scholarship in the field of Jewish mysticism. The Frankfurt conference, and the Berlin conference which followed it, should be viewed within this framework. There are, today, several scholars in major universities in Germany, some of whom are represented in this volume, who dedicate their efforts to this subject, in full or part. German universities have awarded advanced degrees in this subject to young scholars, and several scholarly projects concerning Hebrew mystical texts have been carried out or are in preparation. It is hoped that this volume will serve as an encouragement for the continuation of this process.

The Frankfurt symposium could not have taken place without the substantial support of the *Fritz Thyssen Stiftung* in Köln which, moreover, has made this publication possible, thus promoting the study of Jewish mysticism most effectively.

The *Johann Wolfgang Goethe University of Frankfurt a.M.*, the partner university of the *Hebrew University of Jerusalem*, hosted this partnership conference.

Since music is an integral element of Jewish mysticism, the conference culminated in a magnificent concert of Hebrew hymns and cantatas originating from the spirit of the Kabbalah, planned by Professor Israel Adler from the Hebrew University and performed by the *Junge Kantorei Frankfurt am Main* and the *Ensemble La Fantasia* directed by Joachim Martini. The concert was recorded and broadcast by the *Bayerischer Rundfunk* in Munich. This moving mystical-musical experience was made possible by the generous help of the *Jehoshua and Hanna Bubis-Stiftung*, Frankfurt a.M., the City of Frankfurt and the *Stiftung Allgemeine Hypothekenbank* in Frankfurt.

The editors of this publication, who organized the symposium, would like to express their thanks to the above mentioned foundations and donators, as well as to the scholars and musicians whose support and work contributed to the instructive and fruitful days at the home of a former *Ir we-Em be Yisrael*.

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The Language of the Mystics in Medieval Germany

I

The emergence of Jewish esoteric and mystical speculation in medieval Germany, especially in the Rhineland, in the middle of the 12th century, signifies a turning-point in the history of the Hebrew language. The authors of the treatises written at that time and in the following century had, in many cases, to develop their own language and linguistic norms, having no precedent in the history of Jewish thought for expressing the contents which they wished to present[1] . In many respects, the pietist-mystical circles of that time, known as the Ashkenazi Hasidim, were revolutionaries in their attitude towards language more than in any other aspect of their creativity. Some outlines of this revolution will be discussed in the following presentation, serving as a beginning of the study of this subject, in the framework of a more general investigation of the mystical language of the Jewish spiritualists throughout the ages.

It should be stated from the very beginning of this discussion that the ananlysis we present would have been completely ununderstandable to the medieval scholars and writers who participated in this process, for the simple reason that they did not have neither the concept nor a word for "mysticism",

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[1] The main two avenues of Hebrew expression in the early centuries of the Middle Ages were the tradition of halakhic discussion, which developed uninterrupted since talmudic times (with a brief interlude in the 10th-11th centuries, when many halakhic works were written in Arabic by the Babylonian Geonim), and the homiletical-aggadic, which also continued structures developed in Late Antiquitiy. These were joined, in a somewhat later development, by the poetical language of the *piyyut*. Theological discourse in Hebrew began mainly in the 12th century in Spain, under the impact of Arabic and Judeo-Arabic philosophy. In Germany we do not find writings of this nature until the middle of the 12th century, and the Ashkenazi writers did not have any example to follow, and, so it seems, they did not seek one. The style and structure of their works is highly original, both in the esoteric, theological and mystical works, and in their ethical writings, like the *Sefer Hasidim*. See concerning this Ch. Rabin, "The Tense and Mood System of the Hebrew Sefer Hasidim", *Papers of the Fourth World Congress of Jewish Studies*, II, Jerusalem, 1968, pp. 113-116, and the Ph.D. thesis on the language of Sefer Hasidim by Simha Kogut, The Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 1966.

and therefore the subject of "mystical language" would have been extremely mysterious, if not mystical, in their eyes. Mysticism developed in Judaism without any consciousness on the part of its creators as to its meaning and nature. Hebrew, like Arabic, does not have a word equivalent even partially to the Latin-Christian term of "mysticism". Any identification of a certain Jewish religious phenomenon as "mystical" is a modern scholarly decision, which relies on the modern scholar's understanding of the term; there is no intrinsic demand in the texts themselves for such a usage. An arbitrary element is always combined, therefore, with any discussion of "Jewish mysticism": the very existence of such a subject is the result of applying a terminology and concept which developed outside Jewish culture into the realm of Jewish phenomena.

The concept of "mysticism" was absent from the world-view of the thinkers and writers in Jewish culture in Middle Ages, but the concept of "language" was very well-known to them; yet, their basic attitude towards language was so different from our modern concepts of this subject, that the gulf separating them from us was even greater than concerning the concept of "mysticism". In order to make an attempt to understand their use of language, it is necessary to forsake our modern notions and to adapt ourselves to the one governing the thoughts of the medieval writers we are studying.

The attempt to understand the meaning of human language, especially the relationship between a linguistic expression and the reality represented by it (if any, according to some) has been, in the last three generations, one of the most central and important subject of modern investigation, in philosophy, literary criticism, psychology, and of course, linguistics[2]. One may even say that this problem united these four fields of scholarship into an inherently unified one. The problem of language often was recast as the problem of a text, and its relationship to an existence outside it. The study of language and the study of text can be described as the paramount concern of many modern schools of thought, not the least among them being the now-notorious Deconstruction[3].

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[2] No attempt should be made here to describe this vast and variegated field of inquiry, to which hundreds of scholars in dozens of schools and directions had contributed and continue to do so. The basic questions in a contemporary manner were presented by several schools of linguists and philosophers in France, Germany, England and the United States, whose works are regarded still as relevant in their positioning of the enigma of the relationship between the sign and the signifier. See, especially, the studies collected by C.A. Raschke in: *Deconstruction and Theology*, New York: Crossroad, 1982; and compare: M.C. Taylor, *De-constructing Theology*, New York: Crossroad and Scholars Press, 1982.

[3] Attempts have been going on now for nearly a generation to find a way to employ Derrida's methodology, developed mainly for the purpose of the study of literature and philosophy, to the field of religion and theology.

Yet all modern approaches to the problem of language are based on one fundamental assumption: Language is the expression of human wish to communicate, and it evolved together with the evolvement of human race and its culture[4]. Following some Greek ideas, language can be regarded, sometimes, as the element defining human beings. The concept of language in Judaism in general and in Jewish mysticism and esotericism in particular, is completely different: First and foremost, language is not a human phenomenon.

Jewish tradition states this emphatically and clearly: Before the creation of the world, God occupied himself by tying adorning crowns to the letters of the alphabet[5]. Not only language, but the text existed before the creation: The Torah came into being long before anything else, cosmos or Man, ever existed[6]. Language and text had their independent, autonomous existence within the divine world before any kind of human communication could be conceived. They had - and have had ever since - a meaning unrelated to human needs. The great discovery of some modern philosophers - the independence of the text and the irrelevance of its context - has been made by the talmudic sages a millenium and a half ago. Language is not an attempt to describe existing things; rather, existing things are the unfolding of powers which lie within language.

When language evolved into a means of communication, it did so in a completely different manner than is conceived in the concepts of language as a human tool. It was language which served God as the tool of creation. God pronounced the words - or the text - "let there be light", and "there was light". There is no mistake, no place for hesitation, which came first, language or reality, or concerning the nature of the relationship between language and the subject to which it is related. Language is the source, reality is the outcome. God's pronouncing of several words, collected in the first chapter of Genesis, brought forth all existence. Reality is language-dependent, and it derives its ontology from a force intrinsic to language, a force put into it by God millenia before the actual process of creation. The talmudic sages put this idea into the formula, that God was looking at the Torah when he created the world[7]; that

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[4] The most famous school in this field, that of Noam Chomsky, presented the most detailed hypothesis concering the relationship between the development of humanity as a species and the development of language; this thesis was the catalyst of intense linguistic, anthropological and philosophical study in the last three decades. However, as much as I could see, the possibility of a super-human origin of language, which will connect these studies with the understanding of scriptural religions has not been explored.

[5] *hayah qosher ketarim la-'otiyot, B. Menahot* 29b, in the description of Moses' vision.

[6] See *Bereshit Rabba* 1, 4 (p. 6, Theodor-Albeck edition), and compare *Sifrey, 'Ekev*, 37.

[7] *hayah mistakel ba-torah uvore 'et ha'olam, Bereshit Rabba*, 1, 1 (p. 2) and many paralells listed by Theodor there, and compare especially *Avot De Rabbi Nathan* version I, ch. 31.

is, the text served as a blue-print for the emergent reality. When God sought an abode within the created world, he instructed the people of Israel to create for him a tabernacle in the desert. The Talmud explains how this was done: Bezalel, entrusted with the project, "was knowledgeable concerning the letters by which the world was created"[8]. The tabernacle was a small replica of the cosmos, and in order to build it the secret of creation - the letters of the alphabet - had to be known. The same blue-print was used by Solomon in the building of the Temple in Jerusalem. This concept of the creation was summarized, in a homiletical manner, in one sentence in the *Mishnah, Avot* ch. 5: "The world was created by ten utterances"[9]; ten sentences, a brief text, spoken by God, brought forth all existence.

This basic concept, common to the Bible[10] and the Talmud alike, did not serve as a central element in Jewish religious life during the biblical period. At that time, God was ever-present, to the patriarchs, in the Temple, in the revelation to the people of Israel, the judges, the prophets, and constantly gave direct answers to changing needs. This period is described as one in which a direct approach of God to Man and of Man to God was possible. The central biblical figures are those to whom God spoke, or who were used by God to address the world. The Bible is a record of the many revelations to individuals and groups, directing their religious life. In this period, therefore, the text did not have a paramount meaning and importance; past revelations paled in front of God's constant presence and availability.

A radical change in this situation occured when Judaism adopted the notion that the era of prophecy had ended, early in the history of the second temple[11]. From then on, God did not have a constant presence, living within the people of Israel, guiding and directing them at every stage of history. The only means of knowing God's wishes became the record of the old revelations, the text, the Torah, the scriptures, cast in language. To reach God, one has to study and interpret the old texts and discern from them directions concerning present needs. A revelation originally intended for a specific need at a specific historical juncture became eternal truth, capable of instructing countless generations, if properly exegeted. Exegesis thus became the substitute of revelation; text has become the eternal fountain of divine truth.

At first, this transition from revelation to text was not universally accepted within Judaism. The phenomenon of pseudepigraphic literature demonstrates

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[8] *yodea' hayah bezal'el le-zaref 'otiyot she-nivre'u bahen shamayim wa-arez*, see *B. Berakhot* 55b.

[9] *be-'asarah ma'amarot nivra ha-'olam, M. Avot* 5:1.

[10] *bi-devar H` shamayim ne'esu uve-ruah piw kol zeva'am* (Ps. 33:6, and compare *Bereshit Rabba* 4,6 (p. 30).

[11] Concerning this see especially E. E. Urbach, Halahkah and Prophecy, *Tarbiz* vol. 18 (1947), pp. 1-27.

the adherence of segments of Judaism to the need for constant, direct divine messages. As these could not be contemporary, because of the absence of prophecy in the present, new revelations were ascribed to old, biblical figures like Abraham, Isaiah, Ezra, Adam, Enoch - signifying that inspired people could not present their message directly as coming from God, but had to hide behind the curtain of pseudepigraphy, submerging their own individuality and pretending to present divine revelations given long ago to "legitimate" carriers of such messages[12].

Another result of the absence of prophecy, this one becoming a constant element in Jewish culture, was the claim that ancient divine revelation was not wholly incorporated in the scriptures; parts of it had been transmitted by God orally, and have been preserved as an oral tradition, passing by God orally, and have been preserved as an oral tradition, passing by word of mouth from generation to generation[13]. The concept of the Oral Law was added to the Written Law, thus enlarging the body of scriptures, and making the Mishnah - the most important direct presentation of that oral tradition - an integral part of scriptures. The Mishnah thus became a text, to be regarded as encompassing eternal truth, subject to hermeneutical exegesis like the written law itself.

These developments, mainly occuring during the period of the Second Temple and in the first generations after its destruction, marked the increasing centrality of the concepts of text and language in Jewish religious culture. Similar developments occured in early Christianity: In the first period of its appearance, Christianity represented a direct, revolutionary revelation of God. This, however, was quickly followed by the appearance of scriptures, and besides it - a body of pseudepigraphic literature, and the concept of an oral tradition preserved in the structure of the Church. Soon enough, Christianity came to rely on exegesis of ancient revelation as much as Judaism did, and even the Pope's dicta were supported by exegetical reliance on the old texts.

One peculiar aspect of the emergence of early Christianity was the fact that some of the creators of Christian scriptures did not rely on the living word of God alone, but felt the necessity to couple it with an exegetical reliance on the old revelations as well. The gospel of St. Mathew is the clearest example: Witnessing and testifying to the employs of Christ and presenting his message was not enough for Mathew; he had to show that everything that Christ said

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[12] See P. Schäfer, *Synopse zur Hekhalot Literatur*, Tübingen J.C.B.Mohr (Paul Siebeck) 1981, par. 16, 59; compare the edition of the Hebrew apocalypse of Enoch by Philip Alexander,ed., in: *The Old Testament Pseudepigraphia*, ed. J.H. Charlesworth, Garden City, New York, Doubleday, vol.I (1983).

[13] The development of the concept of the Oral Law has been described in detail by E.E. Urbach, *Hazal*, Jerusalem: Magnes Press, pp. 270-278 et passim.

and did had its roots in the ancient revelations to Isaiah, Michah, Hosea and the other Old Testament prophets. The veracity and sanctity of the Christian truth had to be proved not only by the direct appearance of divine presence, but also by proving that it conformed, and, indeed, revealed the true meaning, of older revelations[14]. This aspect of exegesis became more and more central and dominant in the development of Christianity; the very concept of the Christian scriptures, including the Old and New Testament, signifies this unification of new revelation and the new interpretation of the old one. Those early Christians who refused to accept this unification -namely, the Gnostics[15] - were regarded as heretics and were cast out of the structure of the young Church.

II

The most important aspect of the concept of a divine language, encompassing eternal truth, is the infinity of meaning of language. As long as language is regarded as a human, communicative tool, it is bound by human abilities in its ranges of meanings. Language cannot go farther than human senses, human emotions, human intellect. There must be, in one way or another, a human counterpart to every aspect revealed or denoted by language. But if language is a divine expression, it must represent the infinity of God. As God's truth is inexhaustible, so is the meaning of language.

The very concept of the components of language is radically different when it is conceived as a divine attribute. When language is a human communicative means, it must be directed towards one goal only: communicating meaning. In order to communicate, meaning should be as clear, precise and unambiguous as possible. All the components of which language is constructed - the various sounds, the letters, their shape, their sequence - are all directed towards conveying meaning. But when language is a divine attribute, how can Man declare some aspects of language more important, more meaningful than others? If language was revealed by God first and foremost not as a tool of communication but as a tool of creation, the whole level of meaning cannot be the central one to its essence. From the point of view of meaning, for instance, the form of the letters of the alphabet

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[14] Christianity differed, however, from Judaism in its treatment of the sacred text because of the specific historical circumstances which brought it to sanctify the divine language in translation, in languages which had vast treasures of human creativity cast in them, namely Greek and Latin. I discussed in detail the meaning of this difference in my forthcoming book, The Mystical Language.

[15] The attitude of the Gnostics towards scriptures has been studied by several scholars; see, for instance, the editor's detailed notes to the gnostic texts in: Bentley Layton: *The Gnostic Scriptures, A New Translation with Annotations and Introductions*, Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1987.

is immaterial; knowledge can be transmitted using every kind of letters - Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Chinese signs or Sumerian cuneiform or ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs. The sounds are also unimportant - the same message can be transmitted if a table is called Tisch or *shulhan*. In a divine language, however, nothing can be accidental. Divine truth is conveyed by every aspect of the language - all levels and inflections of sound, shapes of letters, number of letters and many others to be discussed below.

A language which is used by people for communication purposes does not have to be universal. The Etruscans are entitled to their own language as do the Japanese. But if language is divine, there can be only one language, the true divine one, as there is only one, true und universal God. Other languages, the book of Genesis takes pains to demonstrate, are the result of human impertinence and heresy, and the resulting confusion sent by God to prevent the human enterprise of the Tower of Babylon. No Jew throughout history, and almost no Christian[16], ever doubted that the original, divine language was Hebrew. God created the universe by saying *yehi 'or* and not by saying "Let there be light". These two statements differ by their sound, shape, length, etc., and only the former can achieve any creative purpose.

Another biblical demonstration of the uniqueness of the divine language is the episode in which Adam names the animals. Later interpretations, which do not diverge meaningfully from the literal text, clearly indicate that the animals had their names from the very beginning, Adam only recognizing them and pronouncing them[17]. Indeed, the names preceeded the actual existence of the animals and are their source of being; Adam understood this and demonstrated his wisdom in front of the angels, but the names themselves were independent of him and of his knowledge.

If Hebrew is the divine language, used by God for creative, communicative and other purposes (like amusing himself by adorning them before the creation), then all aspects of the Hebrew language are a part of the divine infinite truth. Hebrew does not have the concept of vowels as Latin languages do, so there are special markings for the sounds, the *nequdot*. In a communicative language these marks are relatively unimportant: They assist children when learning to read, but are forgotten when a better knowledge of language is acquired. But if the language is divine, there can be no reason to regard these marks as secondary in any way, and they are an integral, equal

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[16] The exception is anyone who joins the father in Alabama who stated in a PTA meeting considering the study of a foreign language at school: "If English was good enough for Jesus Christ, it is good enough for me".

[17] Compare the analysis of this episode by Walter Benjamin, "Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen", in: *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by R. Tiedemann, H. Schweppenhäuser, Frankfurt a.M. 1972, 143-156, who was probably informed about the midrashic treatments of the subject.

part of the means by which divine truth may be discerned within language. In a similar way, the musical signs, the *te'amim*, which denote the melody by which the Torah portions and their accompanying *haftarot* are to be read in the synagogue, are a part of language equal to any other; the divine message can be found in them like in any other aspect of language. These three elements - the letters, the vowel signs and the melody signs all have specific shapes and forms, which cannot be accidental; they were designed by God together with the totality of the linguistic enterprise. A word may derive its meaning from the combination of all these elements. As Hebrew is the only language, at least the only divine one, the shapes of its letters and other signs are intrinsic to it, being a part of its semiotic message. The fact that the *sh* has three heads and the segol three dots are principal aspects of the language of God.

To these aspects one has to add another, central one in Jewish tradition - the crowns, *tagin*, adorning the letters. This element, postulated as ancient by talmudic tradition, has been employed by many mystics and non-mystics in their analysis of the divine messages. One of the earliest systematic users was the anonymous (third century?) author of the *Sefer Yezira*, who described the process by which God adorned the letters with these crowns as the mystical transition which enabled the letters to become a creative power; the "crowning " of each letter gave it the power and dominance concerning the aspect of creation to which it is responsible[18].

Another aspect of the divine character of language is the numerical one, often, mistakenly, understood as "mystical". Hebrew, like Latin, Greek and other ancient languages, did not have a specific system of signs denoting numbers; only in the last two centuries did Hebrew writers adopt the current numerical signs, which were brought to Europe by the Arabs in the Middle Ages. Before this separation, letters were used to denote numbers, as they did in Greek and Latin. This meant that every Hebrew letter had a numerical meaning, a simple, technical fact carrying no more mystical significance than the use of X for ten in Latin. But if language is divine, the fact that a certain letter denotes a certain number, or that a certain word has a certain numerical value, becomes a part of the divine design of language, and carries a meaning as important as any other segment of language. The analysis of the numerical meaning of letters, words and sentences is therefore equal to the analysis of shapes of letters or the crowns adorning them.

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[18] The author of the *Sefer Yezira* used the literal meaning of *tagin* as crowns to denote not only grandeur and adornment but also power, mastery and government. According to him, when God "crowned" a letter it also gave it dominion on some aspect of creation and existence. The process of "crowning" is thus conceived as one in which the mystical power of creation was inserted into the letters, enabling them to bring forth, and then to nurture and sustain, the various realms of worldly and human existence.

A more complicated result of the concept of language as divine is the implication concerning the order of the letters of the alphabet within words and sentences. When God selected a certain order of letters in the Torah to convey his message, that order is not reflected only in the sequence of letters combined into words which represent the literal meaning of the message. The fact that he chose a certain letter to begin the whole Torah, and another to end it, is, of course, meaningful; but this is true also about the beginning of every verse and every word, or the last letter of every verse and every word. Thus, acronyms, creating words from the first letters of a sequence of words, or from the last letters, or from letters in the middle, are part of the divine message as much as the ordinary arrangement of the letters. "The signature of God is Truth", says the Midrash, following the last three letters of the last three words in the description of the creation in Genesis which combine into the Hebrew term for "truth"[19].

Once the placing of letters becomes a subject for the analysis of the divine message incorporated in language, the number of possibilities increases tremendously. It cannot be an accident that 21 letters are used to convey the ten commandments, and one, *t*, is absent. The number of times a certain letter appears in a certain section of the Bible becomes meaningful, as well as the absence of a letter, or even the final form of one of the letters *mnzpk*. The Ashkenazi Hasidim wrote complete treatises on such subjects.

All these examples refer to the pictures of letters, words and verses as they are presented in the sriptures, and this alone opens, as we have seen, infinite possibilities of interpretation, never to be exhausted. Yet, all these methods take the picture of scriptures as a frozen one, still photographs, to use a modern metaphor. The situation becomes much more complicated once a dynamic element is introduced, the most potent instrument of the interpreter of a sacred text in a divine language: the concept of the transformation of one letter to another, one word to another - *temurah*.

This concept, found already in the Bible[20], is based on another aspect of the sanctity of language: The sanctity of the order of the 22 letters of the alphabet. The sequence of letters is an inherent, unchangeable characteristic; every letter has its place in the order which reflects its being no less than its shape or sound. *Alef* is meaningfully the first, as *bet* is the second and *taw* the

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[19] *B. Shabat* 55a; *Yoma* 69b; *Sanhedrin* 64a. The talmudic sources do not give the obvious reason, which is found in later statements.

[20] See below *bbl-shshk*; it seems that the concept of notarikon, in its minimal fashion of writing a poem beginning with the letters of the alphabet in sequence, thus denoting the intrinsic meaningfulness of the order of the letters, is also biblical (Psalms 119, etc.). Concerning the numerical value, interestingly enough it is not apparent in the Old Testament, but is present in the New Testament, the famous number of the beast of the apocalypse, which is a gematria on the Hebrew value of *nrwn qsr*, *neron qesar*, = 666.

last (it should be noted that the basic order was preserved in most of the alphabet systems that evolved from the Phenician; the letters *yklmn* are found in the same order in every language, witness *JKLMN*, and, of course, the first ones). This order is therefore divine, and contains divine meaning. But if so, the letters may be moved one step, or two, or 11, or 21, and find their equal in another column; that is, one can use the fixed order to substitute another letter for one as long as one retains the correct order. For instance, one can write consistently *taw* instead of *alef*, *bet* instead of *shin*, *gimel* instead of *resh*, and so on, or the reverse, and receive the name of the kingdom of Babylonia, *bbl* as *shshk*, which was done in the Bible. One can move just one notch, and write *bet* instead of *alef*, *gimel* instead of *bet* (or vice versa), and any other change based on the sequence. In fact, this is very similar to coding made out of numbers, when individual numbers, or groups of them, are substituted systematically for others. It can be done with numbers, because their sequence is both fixed and meaningful, it is no accident that 9 follows 8, and therefore the sequence can be tempered with because the fixed order gives it a backbone to return to. *Temurah* thus enables the Hebrew interpreter, assisted by the ancient examples, to substitute any letter for any other, and therefore every word or sentence for every other. Paradoxically, because of the divine nature of language, Man has acquired complete mastery of its meanings, and anything he does with these letters reflects divine truth.

Midrashic interpretation, which in classical Judaism, in the talmudic period, utilized only a small fraction of these possibilities, still included all the principles, enabling the medieval homilist and exegete to reach the fullness of the employment of these enormous possibilities. Language, in this sense, contains the *imago dei* no less than the human form does. And as the human form has infinite variations, contradicting meanings and deeds, yet all of them are, in one way or another, a reflection of the divine, so does language: Every aspect of it can be presented and analyzed in infinite ways, retaining within it the kernel of divine truth in all its countless metamorphoses. This, it should be emphasized again, has nothing to do with mysticism. It is the nature and the essence of a scriptural religion faced with its own sacred texts in their original, pre-human and pre-cosmic language[21].

It should be noted here that the most important Jewish investigation of religious language in antiquity (and probably, in all of the history of Jewish thought), the Book of Creation (*Sefer Yezira*), did not utilize most of these possibilities when presenting a system of scientific thought describing the emergence of the cosmos from God, using the letters as instruments. The author of this book did not use one *gematria*, one acronym nor any other of

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[21] Concerning the position of the *Sefer Yezira* on the subject of sacred language and its transformation of the laws of language (that is, grammar), into the laws of nature, engulfing the cosmos, time and Man, see now my study in *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* vol. 11, 1992.

the numerous possibilities listed above. He did use, in a most central manner, the *temurah*, but only one aspect of it -changing the order of letters in the word to acquire another, but without following the system of the sequence of the letters *'ng to ng'*, to explain the existence of good and evil in the cosmos. He did not use the shape of the letters, nor the vocalization marks, nor the *tagin*, etc. All these systems were offered and remained potential in Jewish thought, to be used, by choice and following personal taste, by anyone who wished and to the extent he wished.

III

As stated above, this is not mysticism. The Midrash is a methodology, which can be employed to any purpose. Several great Jewish rationalistic philosophers in the Middle Ages employed such systems for their own purposes, which were scientific and rational. Where is the borderline? When does Midrash transform into a *via mystica*?

The key concept in this case is, I believe, the one of freedom. Gershom Scholem characterized mysticism as an explosion of freedom of thought and expression within established religion[22]. I believe that he would have hesitated somewhat in his formulation had he considered the enormous amount of freedom of thought and expression that the Midrash itself allows, albeit it being an integral, principal part of established, traditional religion. Yet Scholem is right in his postulation that freedom is one of the most important characteristics of mysticism within a scriptural religion. The ambivalence that I shall try to explain and analyze below is the one of the acquisition of mystical freedom in spite of the fact that mysticism required putting limits upon the infinite freedom of the Midrash.

The earliest example of Jewish mysticism, *Hekhalot* visions, should be considered here. There is no deliberate, systematic use in Hekhalot mysticism of midrashic methodology. One may even suspect that there is an attitude of rejection of it, even though this is not clearly stated. There is no use of letter or language mysticism in any way in this ancient circle of Jewish pneumatics. The reason for that is, I believe, the mystical freedom, employed to the utmost by the Hekhalot mystics: They did not feel it necessary to prove in traditional ways the veracity of their mystical experiences. Hekhalot mysticism is one of direct revelation: The mystic ascends to the celestial chariot, travels from one divine palace *hekhal* to the next until he reaches the seventh, where he faces the Throne of Glory and the figure of the Creator sitting on it. When he

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[22] G. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, New York: Schocken 1965, pp. 5-31; originally published in German: Religiöse Autorität und Mystik, in: *Zur Kabbala und ihrer Symbolik*, Zürich 1960, pp. 11-48 and *Eranos Jahrbuch* 26 (1957), pp. 243-278.

returns to this world he recounts his experiences in direct descriptive language, needing no reliance on the old texts of divine revelation; he has seen everything himself, his own experience is the proof of itself, he does not need any exegesis or homiletics to demonstrate that it is indeed divine truth. Implicit here is the rejection of the Midrash and the return to the biblical concept of direct revelation[23].

The medieval Jewish mystic is characterized by the self-denial of his own experience, by the claim that everything he saw and discovered has been known all along and is hidden within the ancient texts. But that which was hidden in the ancient texts is infinite: the medieval Jewish mystics, especially those in Germany, did more than anyone else in the history of Jewish culture to demonstrate the infinity of the possibilities of meaning inherent in the midrashic system, developing it far beyond the boundaries of the midrashic classical exegesis, though without creating any conflict between themselves and the basic norms of the Midrash.

Two main examples of this attitude among the mystics of medieval Germany are clearly illustrated in the works of the Ashkenazi Hasidic circles of the Rhineland in the second half of the 12th century and the beginning of the 13th. One is Rabbi Eleazar of Worms's Commentary on the Creation *sod ma'aseh bereshit*, which is the opening treatise of the author's magnum opus in esoteric theology, *Sodey Razaya*[24]. In this treatise Rabbi Eleazar analyzes the process of the creation in the format of a commentary on the letters of the alphabet - their shapes, meanings, provenance and many others[25]. This commentary became very influential in later Jewish mysticism, because it was printed (up to the letter L) as the central part of the popular *Sefer Raziel* in 1701. The second example is the Ashkenazi Hasidic concept of the 73 "Gates of Wisdom", in which the Ashkenazi Hasidim concentrated and organized

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[23] On *Hekhalot* literature a vast amount of scholarship has been created in the last two decades, but concerning this particular point, it should be stated that most scholars, beginning with Scholem, did not realize the deep division between talmudic-midrashic Judaism and the basic concepts of *Hekhalot* mysticism; rather, they tended to view the *Hekhalot* mystical attitude as the esoteric stratum of mysticism inherent - and integrated - with talmudic Judaism. I believe this to be erroneous. See in detail: J. Dan, *The Revelation of the Secret of the World, The Beginning of Ancient Jewish Mysticism*, Brown University, 1992.

[24] *Sodey Razayya* is a five-part work, which includes the "*Secret of the Chariot*" (printed as *Sodey Razayya* by I. Kamelhar, Risha 1930); *Hokhmat ha-Nefesh*; *Sefer ha-Shem* and the Commentary on *Sefer Yezira*: the commentary on the alphabet, "The Secret of the Creation", is the first part, which is preceded by a short introduction concerning Hasidic ethics. See J. Dan, *The Esoteric Theology of Ashkenazi Hasidism*, Jerusalem, The Bialik Institute, 1968, pp. 62-64.

[25] A discussion of the concept of language as revealed in this work is presented in a study of mine to be published in the book "*Hebrew in Ashkenaz*", Oxford University Press (forthcoming).

their methods of interpretation of biblical verses[26]. Most of these 73 refer to numerical aspects, the occurances of letters, their absence in certain verses, and the forms of the *temurah*. Others cover all aspects, including the traditional talmudic ones, of interpretation. A special group is one which refers to subjects, some of them literary units - prayer, *Sefer Yezira*, Talmud; others to theological subjects - the divine glory, the unity of God; still others to ethical concepts - humility, love and fear of God, piety. There is no doubt that these "gates" have been utilized by these esoterics and mystics. We have an extensive, anonymous commentary on the Pentateuch, written by an author of this school, each segment of which carries a title which is one of these "gates"[27]. In Rabbi Eleazar of Worms' extensive commentary on the prayers there is some use of it. But the main text relating to this system is Rabbi Eleazar of Worms' "Book of Wisdom". The largest part of this book is dedicated to a demonstration of the use of these "gates", exemplified by the interpretation of the first verse of Genesis. Rabbi Eleazar explains in detail how to apply these principles to the actual analysis of one verse. While doing so, he actually declares, and demonstrates, the infinity of meaning to be found in the biblical language. The 73 "gates" are, in fact, just examples; five of them, for instance, relate to the number of times that a letter is mentioned in a certain biblical section *sha'ar ahadim, sha'ar ha-mishneh, sha'ar ha-meshulash, sha'ar ha-meruba', sha'ar ha-mehumash*. Of course, one does not have to stop here, and it is possible to continue and increase the number. In the same way, just a small selection of temurah possibilities are included; many others can be added on the same basis. The number 73 is an artificial one (it is the numerical value of the term *hokhmah*, while the concept itself is clearly one of infinity of meanings. All these methodological discussions do not refer, in any way, to the possibility of contradiction between meanings. The possibility of a clash between "truths" does not emerge; the belief in the infinity of compatible meanings is absolute.

Another important example of this attitude is found in Rabbi Eleazar's most important theological work, the *Sefer ha-Shem*, which includes dozens of analyses, using many different methods, of the Tetragrammaton and other divine names. This work, together with others of the same school, express the peak of the medieval development of the midrashic concept, used to the extreme, but still adhering to the basic theological and methodological framework created by the ancient Midrash. This process continued to develop during the 13th century among kabbalists, most notably in the works of Abraham Abulafia and the early works of Rabbi Joseph Gikatilla.

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[26] The list of these gates was published by me, from Rabbi Eleazar's *Sefer ha-Hokhmah*, *Studies in Ashkenazi Hasidic Literature* pp. 52-57 [Hebr.].

[27] See J. Dan, "*The Ashkenazi Hasidic »Gates of Wisdom«*", Homage a Georges Vajda", ed. par G. Nahon et C. Touati, Editions Peeters, Louvain 1980, pp. 184-189.

The problem to be discussed is, when does such a midrashic system, elaborated and developed almost ad absurdum, become a mystical one. The basic concept of the infinity of meanings is not compatible with the basic attitude of mystics, who do believe in a distinction between true and not true, or at least, between the true and the more true. How does mysticism relate to the Midrash?

Obviously, one should completely deny those popular - even vulgar - tendencies to identify mysticism with any numerical interpretation of verses, or with transmutations of letters, with exegesis of the holy name and similar methodologies. These are external means, their use being dictated by the non-mystical, literal concept of language as divine. Within the framework of such an understanding of language, these methods are actually logical consequences of the basic theology and cosmogony. It is a very poor concept, indeed, which diagnoses mysticism by the use of such methods just because they seem unfamiliar to the reader. The midrashic attitude is inherent in the scriptural concept of cosmogony, and has nothing to do, directly, with mysticism. Mystics may use them like many others, but the methodology itself has no mystical element in it.

The problem has some phenomenological similarity to other schools of thought which developed within the framework of the belief in divine language. A traditional Jewish example is that of the law, the *Halakhah*. The legal aspect of Judaism shares all the theological and linguistic concepts described above, but it cannot sustain the anarchy of infinity of meanings; legal decisions must be clear, unambiguous and literal so that proper actions can follow and legal definitions between right and wrong be made. This is impossible within the midrashic structure itself; another dimension of decision-making, an external criterion, has to be introduced in order to differentiate between right and wrong from the legal point of view.

In Judaism, this external criterion is tradition. The laws of the Halakhah are not binding because they represent the true interpretation of a biblical verse. The laws differentiating between dairy and meat in kosher food are not binding because they are the correct interpretation of *lo tevashel gedi baḥalev 'immo*[28]. They are binding because they represent the commandments given to Moses on Mount Sinai by God himself, and transmitted from generation to generation not only orally, but, more important, practically. Even an oral tradition can be interpreted in many ways; practical behavior cannot. The tradition of commandments and their performance is the deciding factor concerning law, and not the interpretation of a biblical verse; this is used almost in an ornamental fashion, to prove that the commandments are also imbedded in the Written Torah, but exegesis is not the decisive factor in the creation of the law.

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[28] Ex. 23:19, 34:26, Dt. 14:21.

In a similar way, Jewish rationalism in the Middle Ages adopted the external criterion of logic to discern the one, true, logical meaning among the infinite midrashic ones. A religious system which is based on logic is not necessarily a completely anthropocentric one. The laws of logic themselves have been implanted in the human mind by the creator. God, being benevolent and just, will not delude his creatures by making their minds reach untrue conclusions. Strict adherence to human logic, therefore, can be conceived as an adherence to divine truth. The "text of revelation" in such a system can be the rules of logic themselves, as given by God to Man when He constructed his intelligence. Rationalism, therefore, can be regarded as the adherence to one aspect of revealed divine truth, the one implanted in the human mind in the form of reason and logic, in order to discern among the infinite interpretations of linguistic revelation the ones which conform with this "external" yardstick, the laws of logic.

These two examples express the possibility to use one kind of revelation in order to overcome the anarchy of midrashic interpretation of ancient revelation: Tradition concerning a legal system or human logic, derived from the divine wisdom, in a rationalistic one. It seems that mysticism reflects a similar phenomenological attitude, though very different in many details of application.

The mystic's avenue to divine truth is meta-linguistic. Language, in its sensual and intellectual aspects, reflects, according to him, only the superficial and literal aspects of existence, which are very remote (and sometimes, even contradictory) to divine truth. Even though language is divine, when it is employed for human and earthly purposes it cannot convey the hidden, mystical divine truth. Language can serve as a means to some, remote, partial and imprecise approach to divine truth only when it is reconnected to its supreme divine source. Such a connection creates the mystical symbol, which is an obscure linguistic approximation of the eternally hidden divine truth. Symbols do not derive their potency from their place in language, but from their connection, a mystical undefinable one, to the hidden meta-linguistic meaning. That means that the basis for the mystical symbol, and for a linguistic symbolical expression of mystical truth, is the mystical experience, rather than any linguistic exegetical or homiletical enterprise.

The "external" yardstick, by which a mystic discerns between mystical truth and literal, earthly un-truth is therefore a meta-linguistic one of mystical experience. This experience is what enables the mystic to distinguish between the literal, homiletical, logical and midrashic aspects of language on the one hand, and the symbolical aspect of language, denoting mystical truth, on the other. The mystical symbol can be portrayed as the upper ninth of an iceberg protruding above the sea; truth is the iceberg itself, its totality, whereas the linguistic expression, which is inherently tied to it and is an integral part of it,

is the symbol. The symbol can reveal a great deal about the hidden truth, but it is a very great mistake, a titanic one, to see the tip of the iceberg as its totality. The non-mystic cannot differentiate between "tips" which are nothing but that, and "tips" to which an iceberg is connected; this is the unique ability of the mystic, in his meta-linguistic experience.

This "external" criterion is, on the one hand, very similar to the position of tradition in the quest for legal truth, and of the laws of logic in the quest for rationalistic truth. It differs from them, however, in the fact that while their final achievement is a precise linguistic statement, for the mystic truth will forever be beyond language. Symbolical expression, in language, of mystical truth is anything but precise. The "tip of the iceberg" can be described from various angles and aspects, its characteristics expressed in various linguistic formulations, all of them connected in one way or another to the essence of the hidden truth, but never expressing its entirety.

Rationalism and law put limits, forced by their "external criterion", upon midrashic expression. Mysticism does not necessarily do so. It can adopt all the varieties of midrashic exegesis and incorporate them into its continuous quest for the impossible, for the linguistic expression of meta-linguistic truth. There is no inherent contradiction, from a methodological point of view, between midrashic and mystical exegesis. The difference lies much deeper: For the midrashic exegete, midrashic truths are symbols of unknown and unexpressible truth.

This is the reason why Jewish mysticism, throughout the Middle Ages and early modern times, seems to be so close to the world of the Midrash, and why the midrashic format is so central to the literary genres of the medieval mystics. The *Book Bahir* and the *Zohar* are mystical Midrashim. In every external methodological way, they are Midrashim, in the full sense of the term. They differ from the classical Midrashim in one most meaningful way: their conclusions are not truth expressed by language, but truth expressed by linguistic symbols, intrinsically supported by the mystical meta-linguistic experience of the author.

How does one discern among the two? Their appearance may be not only very similar, but actually identical. This, indeed, is the most difficult task facing a scholar who wishes to understand mysticism within the framework of a divine language, with a rich midrashic tradition like the Hebrew one. Ashkenazi Hasidism, I believe, presents in this respect one of the most intriguing and interesting examples.

There are several examples in the history of Jewish mysticism in which the "external criterion" is clearly expressed. Shem Tov ben Gaon, in the early 14th century, in a kabbalistic treatise completely concerned with linguistic, midrashic study of the kabbalistic interpretation of biblical verses - some chapters of this work actually read like a mystical-midrashic manual - stops his discussion to declare that he has seen the heavens open and revealing

divine secrets in an immediate, direct manner[29]. The early kabbalists in the Provence expressed this external criterion by the statement that the prophet Elijah has been revealed to their sages and disclosed to them the unique secrets that they describe[30]. Several medieval mystics, in Germany and elsewhere, relied on a "dream question", a practice of divination assisted by scripture, to reveal to them meta-midrashic truths, often related to *Halakhah*. Isaac Luria was reputed to visit the heavenly academy when he seemed to be sleeping, and studying Kabbalah with the prophet Elijah. The Besht, the founder of modern Hasidism, reported his "ascent of the soul" to the palace of the Messiah, who revealed to him secrets concerning the redemption, and there are many many others. Yet, on the whole, kabbalists preferred to concentrate on the text, not allowing their readers take a glimpse into their innermost experiences, which gave the basis for their commentaries and sermons, midrashic in nature, debating various aspects of the divine world.

This fact seemed to create a meaningful difference between Jewish and Christian mysticism. The lingering impression is that while Christian mysticism is experiental, personal, poetic and direct, Jewish mysticism is more of a theosophy than "real" mysticism. This impression, however, is completely wrong, because of several reasons.

First, it is wrong to assume that the mystics who described in personal, poetic language their mystical experiences, like St. John of the Cross and Santa Theresa, "the Carmelite school", represent Christian mysticism. They are just one segment, in many respects an exceptional one, in the long history of Christian mysticism. For a long time Christian mysticism could hardly be separated from neo-Platonist philosophical treatises[31]; there is no personal word in the greatest masterpiece of Christian mysticism, the Pseudo-Dionisian writings[32]. Eastern Christian mysticism tends very often towards a "theosophic" character, much like many kabbalistic treatises. The fame that the Carmelites acquired should not hide the fact that most Christian mystics

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[29] See my study of the subject "The Worms Epistle and the Problem of Pseudepigraphy in Early Kabbalah, *Studies in Kabbalah and Ethical Literature Presented to Isaiah Tishby*, eds., J. Dan and J. Hacker, vol. 3, part 1 Jerusalem 1984 (*Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought*), pp. 111-138.

[30] G. Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, translated by Allan Arkush, ed., R. I. Zwi Werblowsky, Princeton, Princeton University Press and the Jewish Publication Society 1987, pp. 35-39, 238-243.

[31] The clearest exposition of this attitude is to be found in the classical study of William R. Inge, *Christian Mysticism*, London: Methuen, 1899, and was followed by many scholars in the present century. See a detailed analysis of this school, Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, New York, Crossroads, 1991, 273-278 et passim.

[32] See the recent essay by Jaroslav Pelikan, "The Odyssey of Dionysian Spirituality", in: *Pseudo-Dionisius, The Complete Works*, Translated by C. Luibheid, New York, Paulist Press, 1987, pp. 11-25.

were as reluctant to deal with their personal, direct experiences as were Jewish ones.

The second misconception is to equate mysticism with a particular literary genre, dictating to mystics the means of their expression. The fact is that mystics used (and, sometimes, abused), all literary genres, up to and including the scholarly multinoted "study", as well as many non-verbal ways of expression. There is no inherent reason why mysticism should be expressed more in a poetic, personal, experiental language, than by a pseudo-neo-Platonic treatise or a "scholarly" study. Several well-known biographical studies of central mystical figures are, to a very large extent, expressions of the "Scholar"'s sharing of the mystical experience of his hero, actually representing a spiritual experience rather than the results of scholarly research. When we approach the works of the medieval mystics, therefore, the literary presentation should be regarded as an expression of the mystic's relationship to his social and cultural environment, which influenced his choice of means, rather than defining his mystical or non-mystical attitude.

The third element, the most difficult to grasp and utilize in the study of mysticism, is the question of where is God to be found. We tend to assume that God awaits the mystic in visual, extra-cosmic circumstances, that meeting God means forsaking the earth and the body and being uplifted outside of the material realm in order to approach the pure spirituality of His essence.

This concept, so deeply ingrained in our culture, is one more result of our existence in the realm dominated by the notion that language is a human phenomenon. As such, it is not in language, while divinity transcends language. This is true concerning secular, Christian-based culture; it is completely untrue when we try to understand the creativeness of mystics who reside in a centuries-old culture which believes that language is divine in origin, it is employed by God for various purposes far beyond communication, the essence of creativity resides in it, and the secrets of God are incorporated within it. In such a culture, the tendency to seek God within a book will be at least as natural as to seek Him in heaven.

The immersion in a text, having it as inspiration and as a revelation, is a basic experience within a religion based on divine revelation in and by language. Psychologically, there is an added dimension of directness when the spiritual qualities of the text meet and merge with the spirituality of the mystic. The mystic, by his basic nature, believes in God's presence within language no less, and in a more fundamental way, in the text than in heaven. Such a meeting is actually skipping the visual stage, the pictures of the ascent and the surroundings of the divine essence, and going directly to the spiritual essence without sensual imagery intervening.

There are, in Jewish medieval mysticism, several types of such a mystical experience through the text. One group, which will not be discussed here

despite its centrality to the mystical world of the Ashkenazi Hasidim, is the meeting by means of the text of the prayers. This is an aspect of mystical unity with all existence developed in the school of Rabbi Judah the Pious, which should be studied extensively in a separate study[33].

Sometimes the text serves just as a slight, marginal excuse of mystical expression. A classic example of that may be found, for instance, in the *Zohar*s description of the beginning of the creation, when the biblical text which is interpreted serves in a most minor role; the author, in almost a mystical ecstasy, creates his own terminology, and the enormous vision unfolded is a unique expression of a supreme mystical experience, a mystic actually being present in the moment that everything - including God himself - was just beginning to unfold, as if in the presence, or even the participation, of the mystic himself. It seems that this is one of the clearest examples of the irrelevance of the homiletical literary framework, and a demonstration of the mystic's ability to express intense, deeply personal, mystical experience in any literary format he may be dealing with.

In other cases it is the biblical verse, or the talmudic saying, or a paragraph from the *Sefer Yezira*, which serve as the trigger as well as the external structure of the mystical experience. This, probably, is the most common way of expressing mystical experience in kabbalistic literature. The writers of these kabbalistic treatises had deep within themselves the glimpse of supernal mystical truth, and then found a way to integrate a symbolical reflection of this truth within their exegetical works. It seems that one should not be surprised by the fact that mystics, so deeply immersed in the language of divine revelation, will interpret their own mystical experience as a direction towards a new understanding of the words of ancient texts. The divine spark which they have envisioned (not necessarily in any visual way), was transformed within their personality into a symbolical statement of a new aspect of meaning in the old, traditional words spoken by God to Man in Antiquity.

Sometimes this process is even more obvious, especially when the mystic himself feels, from the very beginning of his mystical experience, that his contact with the divine is verbal in nature; God, he feels, speaks to him, or even directs his hand when writing. In such cases, the line between old textual revelation and new mystical experience is really very hard to draw, because God speaking to the mystic in words is bound to use the same linguistic formulations He had used in early revelations. Taken to the extreme, this will be a phenomenon in which the mystic believes that God Himself is presenting him with a new exegesis of His own ancient words. Many Jewish

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[33] A few remarks on this subject can be found in my study: "The Emergence of the Mystical Prayer, *Studies in Jewish Mysticism* eds., J. Dan and F. Talmage, Cambridge, Association of Jewish Studies, 1981, pp. 85-120; a more detailed study on this subject is forthcoming.

mystics (and non-mystics) had the very powerful image of divine activity as being modelled after the textual deliberations of an earthly talmudic academy. God, like everybody else, spends his time studying the Torah, together with the great sages and saints of earlier times. Mystical experience is therefore often clothed in the garb of participation in the deliberations of the heavenly academies. In such cases there is no wonder that the mystical expression will be presented, from the very beginning, in the format of commentaries and homiletics. Sometimes one may surmise that this, indeed, was the intrinsic nature of the mystical experience itself.

A case in point, exemplifying and emphasizing this tendency, is the widespread late-medieval and early-modern kabbalistic phenomenon of the celestial *maggid*, a divine power revealed to mystics and dictating them divine secrets. Many detailed descriptions survive of this phenomenon, and it seems that in most cases the experience was entirely an audio-textual one[34]. It may appear to be a paradoxical phenomenon, but it actually expresses the thesis we are trying to establish here: mystical kabbalistic experience is very often the mystical revelation of the old text of revelation itself. Old theophany is transformed into contemporary mystical revelation. In this way, the gulf between the very essence of the mystical experience and its literary expression in the form of commentaries, exegesis, homiletics and hermeneutics has become a minimal one[35].

The century between 1170-1270, approximately, is the one in which all the phenomena described above came to a head among the Jewish esoterics and mystics in Germany, especially in the Ashkenazi Hasidic circles. Three processes converged together in this period to create one of the most intense and variegated spiritual development in medieval Judaism. The first process was the development of the midrashic methods to their extreme expression of the infinity of meanings of the scriptural verse, especially in the system of the "73 gates of wisdom". The second was the intrusion of a mystical element into this structure, the appearance of an "external criterion" which transformed midrashic anarchic deliberations into the discovery of mystical symbolism[36].

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[34] One of the most detailed ones is that of Rabbi Moses Hayyim Luzzato, early in the 18th century. See: M. Benayahu, The Maggid of Ramhal, *Sefunot* vol. 5, Jerusalem 1961, pp. 297-336.

[35] A special example of this process can be found in the case of mystics who tend to express themselves by numerical analyses of texts; some of the Ashkenazi Hasidim had this tendency. We may surmise that mystical experience, for them, also carried a numerical character. A similar phenomenon may possibly be apparent even in scholarship, as Scholem has hinted in the famous case of the Weinstock-Adiriron identification; see his note in *Tarbiz*, vol. 32, 1963, p. 258, note 15.

[36] This subject cannot be explored in this paper, yet it should be emphasized that concerning Ashkenazi Hasidim, and especially concerning Rabbi Judah the Pious, who was undoubtedly the most mystically-inclined among these esoterical thinkers, this criterion can be identified rather clearly. The mystical element in Rabbi Judah's thought is concerned with the discovery of an intrinsic harmony,

The third was the appearance of the Kabbalah, and especially kabbalistic texts, which opened new vistas of mystical symbolic expression for the mystics of medieval Germany. The writings of Rabbi Moses, the great-grandson of Rabbi Judah the Pious, probably around 1270, express the convergence of these three processes into one meaningful mystical experience[37].

The "external criterion" of mystical truth which characterizes Ashkenazi Hasidism is, I believe, a mystical awareness of the intrinsic unity of all sacred phenomena, and their distance from all earthly, material ones. Unlike the Kabbalah, Ashkenazi Hasidism does not introduce a dynamic element, a mythical diversity, into the divine world. Therefore, their theological discussions of the celestial realms are not intended to distinguish and separate, as do the kabbalists, but to unite and identify, to show the intrinsic harmony and identity in everything. In demonstrating that mystical truth, midrashic methodology became their main instrument, and therefore the character of their mysticism is intensely linguistic, probably more than that of any other mystical movement in Jewish history.

The phrase which most expresses the Ashkenazi Hasidic mystical attitude is a simple one: *be qeraṣim uve-lula'ot*, "with hooks and loops", denoting the way that all religious texts and all divine phenomena in the world, past and present, are connected together.

Rabbi Moses was familiar with all the methods of the Ashkenazi Hasidic exegesis, and used them in his works. But the distinctive, new element in his works is the intrusion of two texts into this world, one an ancient work of Hekhalot tradition, the *Sod ha-Gadol*, "the Great Secret", and the other - the kabbalistic text of the Bahir. When reading Rabbi Moses' comentary on some prayers of the *Shi'ur Qomah* text[38], one easily observes the enormous spiritual

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structural and numerical, between all parts of the sacred texts, biblical and prayers, and the divine and earthly world. This seems to have been the subject of Rabbi Judah's now lost vast Commentary on the Prayers. Rabbi Judah set out in this work to demonstrate the comprehensiveness of this harmony, insisting that its veracity is attested by ancient tradition, yet its formulation is obviously a new discovery, probably the result of Rabbi Judah's own mystical inclination. The "external criterion" in this case is this deep confidence that everything in existence, spiritual, textual and physical, has the same "print" of the divine touch, identified by the numerical-structural harmony. I have pointed out this element briefly in the paper: "The Emergence of the Mystical Prayer" (above note 33), and it is a subject of a much more detailed analysis in a forthcoming study.

[37] Rabbi Moses' position in the history of Ashkenazi Hasidism and the Kabbalah, and the nature of his works were first presented and analyzed by G. Scholem in an appendix to his *Reshit ha-Qabbalah*, Tel Aviv and Jerusalem 1948, Schocken, 1948, pp. 195-238.

[38] Parts of this commentary were printed by Scholem, ibid., pp. 212-238. There are, however, several manuscripts of this work which were not used by Scholem which considerably assist in establishing the text and the structure of the work. In the Hebrew version of this study, to be published elsewhere, I

impact that these two texts had upon the German-Jewish mystic.

These two works, the *Bahir* and the "Great Secret", are closely connected, and Scholem dedicated much effort to the understanding of this connection. The Sod was undoubtedly one of the sources of the *Bahir*, and a serious problem, still unsolved, is to what extent the concept of the pleroma in the Bahir is derived from the ancient work[39]. The quotations from the *Sod* by Rabbi Moses are the only ones we have; earlier references include only its title, and later writers did not preserve its text. One of the haunting enigmas of this chapter in the history of Jewish mysticism is this almost unbelievable accident, that the first German Jewish mystic to quote the Book *Bahir* is the only Jewish writer to preserve portions of this source of the *Bahir*, the *Sod ha-Gadol*; actually, Rabbi Moses quotes the two sources almost as if they were one, usually attaching a quote from one to the other, creating a textual structure which is often rather difficult to comprehend and to point out, with any certainty, which quotations belong to the *Bahir* and which to the *Sod*.

This is an important philological and historical problem, but our concern here is with Rabbi Moses himself, as an independent mystic, and not in his role in preserving ancient texts. In this respect, the interesting aspect is the treatment of these sources by Rabbi Moses. It seems evident that for him, these two texts represented divine, mystical revelation. They were, for him, this "external criterion", clothed in linguistic, symbolical garb, which expresses mystical divine truth and transcends the anarchy of midrashic-Ashkenazi-Hasidic expression. The unification of Kabbalah and Ashkenazi Hasidism, evident in the use of the *Bahir*, *Sod ha-Sodot* and *Hekhalot* mystical texts, reflects a deeper unity of mystical perception, imposing a new structure of divine truth and harmonizing around it his diverse sources. This is, I believe, a rather typical process, identifying the development of mystical awareness among Jewish scholars in the High Middle Ages.

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shall include a textual analysis of the work, its recensions and the conclusions concerning the relationship between the various sources as a result of the comparison between the various texts.

[39] Some hesitation can be discerned in Scholem's analysis of this problem. Answering it conclusively is impossible before much more textual work is done in collecting the manuscripts of this work and editing them with a philological analysis. At this moment, however, it seems to me that there is no clear indication here that the concept of the ten sefirot, and the symbols of the *Bahir* describing them, is to be found in the "Great Secret", and it still seems that the *Bahir* is the first expression in our possession of this kabbalistic symbolism.

Karl Erich Grözinger

Between Magic and Religion - Ashkenazi Hasidic Piety

Hasidic Ashkenazi literature is known to scholars of Jewish religion as one of the most prolific sources of medieval Jewish magic or magical beliefs. This is all the more astonishing as the non esoteric writings of the *Hasidey Ashkenaz* represent a rather traditional Jewish piety as known to us from talmudic sources. Considering this duality of an almost traditional Jewish piety on the one hand and very distinct magic tenets on the other, we may ask whether the *Hasidey Ashkenaz* themselves perceived any difference between magic and religion. There are indeed a number of modern historians of religion who completely deny the validity of such a distinction, for in most historical religions magic and religion are in fact intertwined to a certain degree, thus permitting almost no differentiation between the two.

It was Erwin R. Goodenough in his monumental opus on "Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period"[1] who rigidly denied any justification of a distinction between magic and religion, as in his view this distinction was a subjective value judgment, not an objective criterion. He formulated his opinion in the following drastic manner:

> "Thus the contrast between religion and magic appears to be the reflection of a personal value judgement, not an objectively observable distinction."[2]
>
> " »Magic« seems to me then to be a term of judgment, not of classification. It is used subjectively, not objectively [...]".[3]

Should one conclude from Goodenough's statement that it would be better to refrain altogether from all attempts to assess of any differences between magic and religion ? My answer would be 'no!' Instead, I believe we have to put the question of the relation between magic and religion in a different manner. Instead of asking whether there is a difference between magic and religion, we should inquire, to what degree is the element we usually call magic integrated into the religious beliefs of the religion under discussion? That is, we should clarify whether the magical element is an integral part of the

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[1] *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period*, NY-Toronto 1953, Vol. II.

[2] op.cit. vol. 2, p. 156.

[3] op.cit. p. 159.