

**COMMITTEE VII**

In Search for Understanding  
Among the Monotheistic  
Religions

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**JEWISH MYSTICISM**

by

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## Jewish Mysticism

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Gershom Scholem, the foremost authority on Jewish mysticism, has once pointed out that "there is no mysticism in general, there are only particular mystical systems and individuals, Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, Jewish, Christian, and so forth."<sup>1</sup> To this I might add right here what Louis Dupré said about Jewish mysticism: "Judaism has produced forms of mysticism so unlike any other and so variant among themselves that no common characteristic marks them all. At most we can say that they 'commune' with one another, not that they share an identical spirit."<sup>2</sup> I am in full agreement with both observations, and, consequently, what I shall try to do in this paper is to discuss and present what I consider the most important manifestations of Jewish mystical thought and practice. I shall also point out certain correspondences between the Jewish and one other mystical doctrine, namely the Hindu, that have so far been largely overlooked.

To introduce our subject, let me first consider briefly what is meant by mysticism in general. Evelyn Underhill, in her classic Mysticism, defined it as "the name of that organic process which involves the perfect consummation of the Love of God: the achievement here and now of the immortal heritage of man."<sup>3</sup> This definition, while it is undoubtedly adequate as far as Christian mysticism is concerned, falls short in applicability to non-monotheistic mystical doctrines and practices, such as those of the Yoga which are important in Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, etc., and in which mysticism is basically a quest for purification, inner illumination, and union with ultimate reality, without reference to God, that is, to a divine Person. Nor does the Underhill definition cover practices of mystical ecstasy, such as, e. g., those utilized in the Peyote cult of the Aztecs and the North American Indians. And even if we narrow our view to the monotheistic religions, Underhill's definition

does not sit quite well with the mysticisms of Islam and Judaism. In Islam, the mystic does not primarily aim at a "perfect consummation of the Love of God," but rather at an inner and essential union between himself and God. And as far as Judaism is concerned, as we shall see anon, while the Jewish mystic does strive to achieve d'vequt, or "adhesion" to God, his overriding concern is much less ego-centered than that: it is to help restore the shattered unity or wholeness of God.

In view of these considerations I would venture to propose a more comprehensive definition of mysticism, namely, the belief in the possibility of, and the practices leading to, the establishment of a direct, immediate relationship between man and the supernatural.

Before we get into a discussion of Jewish mysticism it seems advisable to dispose briefly of another issue: <sup>its</sup> ~~and that is the~~ evaluation ~~of Jewish~~ in Jewish scholarship. It is nothing less than remarkable to what extent the view of Jewish scholars on Jewish mysticism has changed within the last hundred years or so from a totally negative disdain to a highly positive appreciation. Heinrich Graetz (1817-1891), the father of modern Jewish historiography, who wrote his eleven-volume History of the Jews in 1853-1870, expresses himself in scathing scorn when speaking of the Kabbala in general, and of its chief opus, the Book of Zohar, in particular. He says of the former that as a result of the Kabbala the "devotion in prayer degenerated into Kabbalistic trifling," that Isaac Luria's Kabbala sounded "like the laughter of a madman," that "in relation to morality, too, the mysticism of Lurya had a corrupting influence," while the Zohar was a "notorious forgery," which is nothing but a "farrago," and contains "feverish fancies or dissolves in childish silliness," and "it is almost impossible to give an idea of the abuse which the Zohar or [its author] Moses de Leon practices in the interpretation of the Holy Writ." The

Zohar, says Graetz, "confirmed and propagated a gloomy superstition," "those who occupied themselves with it were lulled into a sort of half-sleep, and lost the faculty of distinguishing between right and wrong," and "made the Bible the wrestling-ground of the most curious, insane notions."<sup>4</sup>

By the late years of the 19th century the views of Jewish scholars on the Kabbala and the Zohar had changed to an appreciable extent. About 1900 Kaufman Kohler and Louis Ginzberg wrote a factual article of ca. 27,000 words on "Cabala" for the Jewish Encyclopedia, in which the earlier sharp criticism was reduced to the disapproving references to "the often repulsive Zoharic Cabala," and to the Kabbalistic legitimization of astrology and bibliomancy which were pronounced "most pernicious in their influence on the intellect and soul of the Jew."<sup>5</sup>

The final rehabilitation of Jewish mysticism was effected by Gershom Scholem (1897-1942), who devoted his entire life to the study and of, and scholarly writing about, the Kabbala. Scholem was not only the most significant modern Jewish scholar of the Kabbala, but also an outspoken admirer of Jewish mysticism, whose role in the reinterpretation of the history of Jewish religion is considered seminal. In addition to his many books on the subject, Scholem wrote a book-length article on "Kabbalah" (no less than 115,000 words in length) for the Encyclopaedia Judaica, published in Jerusalem in 1972.<sup>6</sup> Basing himself largely on Scholem, Louis Dupré in his excellent overview of the manifold manifestations of mysticism in the new Encyclopedia of Religion terms the Zohar "that unsurpassed masterpiece of mystical speculation."<sup>7</sup> Therewith the Zohar has come to occupy the place due to it among the greatest mystical writings of the world's religions.

Having mentioned above d'vegut, let me now begin my discussion of

term  
Jewish mysticism with a closer look at this ~~concept~~ as an example of the extremely ancient roots of the concepts with which Jewish mysticism operates. The term ~~itself~~<sup>self?</sup> is of biblical origin: in Deut. 11:22 we read, "...love the Lord your God, to walk in all His ways, and to cleave (ul'dovgah) unto Him..." That is to say, ~~the~~ love ~~of~~ God and to cleave to Him are explicit biblical commandments, even though the term "cleave" is not used in a mystical sense, but as an elucidation of what is meant by "diligently keeping the commandments" of God referred to in the preceding verse. It was only the medieval Jewish mystical <sup>a.</sup> authors who endowed the term and concept d'vequt with a deeper spiritual meaning. Thus Moses ben Nahman (1194-c. 1270), better known as Nahmanides, the foremost Spanish talmudist who was also an early Kabbalist, said, "One should always remember God and His love, never cease thinking of Him, so that even when one is talking to one's fellow-men one's heart be with God." The younger contemporary of Nahmanides, Abraham Abulafia (1241-after 1291), who was not only a Kabbalist but also a Messianic pretender (as such he tried to convert Pope Nicholas III to Judaism which almost cost him his life), used the term d'vequt in the sense<sup>of</sup> of ecstasy. And much later, in the Hasidic movement founded by Israel Baal Shem Tov (c. 1699-1760) in the mid-eighteenth century, d'vequt assumed the dual meaning of contemplative and ecstatic approaches to God. The famous disciple and heir of Israel Baal Shem Tov, Dov Ber of Mezhir<sup>ic</sup>h (c. 1710-1772), taught that "the principal elements of divine worship are d'vequt and awe."

But with the mention of Hasidim<sup>s</sup> we have jumped far ahead, and before dealing with that highly significant recent mystical movement in Judaism (which we shall do toward the end of this paper), we must go back, at least briefly, to the origins of the Kabbala, by which term Jewish mysticism has been known since the 12th or 13th century. That individuals with a mystical

-5-      Since the very beginnings of their history

bent have existed among the Jewish people, is amply attested by such traditions as the awesome nocturnal vision of Abraham (Gen. 15:12-17), the appearance of the angel of the Lord to Hagar (Gen. 16:7-14) and of the Lord to Rebekah (Gen. 25:22-23), Jacob's vision at Beth-el (Gen. 28:10-20) and his encounter with God at Peniel (Gen. 32:25-33), Moses' vision of the Burning Bush (Ex. 3:1ff.), and the great epiphanies of Isaiah 6 and Ezekiel 1. The same mystical trend is clearly discernible in the post-biblical period, in the Apocrypha, in the writings of Philo (c. 20 BCE-after 40CE), the famous Alexandrian Jewish philosopher, ~~MOSES~~ and in the sayings and teachings transmitted in the Talmud and the Midrash literature in the name of several outstanding sages. The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls and their study have shown that mysticism was a significant trend in the Judaism of the first century BCE. This brief enumeration leads me to the conclusion that the mystical tendency developed among the ancient Hebrews, and their heirs the Jews in talmudic times, internally and spontaneously, and that it was a further manifestation of the Jewish religious genius that had earlier expressed itself in the unparalleled creation of the universal ethical monotheism of the Hebrew prophets.

The time-frame of this presentation permits me to mention briefly only two types of mystical speculations in which some talmudic sages engaged and which were subsequently taken up by medieval Jewish mystical thought: the Ma'ase Merkava, literally, "Work of the Chariot," that is, Merkava mysticism, and the Ma'ase B'reshit, or "Work of Creation," that is, Creation mysticism. The first took off from Ezekiel's vision of the divine merkava or chariot-throne (Eze. 1:1-28), and dealt with the human sense-perception of God; the second, based on Genesis 1, tried to penetrate the mysteries of Creation and the structure of the universe, that is, cosmogony and cosmology. Both of these endeavors were considered fraught with dangers, with the peril of being entrapped by heresy, for which reason an authori-

tative dictum in the Mishna (Hagiga ~~14b~~) restricted their study. The achievement by contemplation and ecstasy of spiritual experiences was referred to in the Talmud (B. Hag. 14b) as "entering the Pardes," that is, the mystical "orchard", which, it is reported, caused the death of one of the four sages who dared to undertake it, the loss of his mind to the second, led into apostasy the third, and only the fourth, the great Rabbi Akiba, "ascended in peace and descended in peace," that is, survived the experience without damage, although not a word is said about what he saw and learned there.

From talmudic times, or possibly from a later age, date the treatises usually referred to as Hekhalot literature, because their external form is a description of the hekhalot, or heavenly halls, in which the divine throne-chariot is supposed to be located. These writings are attributed, typically, to leading talmudic sages, such as Rabbi Akiba and Rabbi Ishmael, who lived in the second century CE, and thus they are early examples of the tendency that peaked with the Zohar to secure the acceptance of a work by pseudepigraphically ascribing it to an early sage of great repute.

A variant of the Hekhalot literature comprises texts known as Shi'ur Qoma, literally "Measure of the Body," which deal with the appearance of God whose glimpse is vouchsafed to the mystic <sup>en he</sup> who in his visionary experience penetrates the supernal world of the heavenly halls. These texts, dating from late talmudic or early post-talmudic times, although their sources, as Scholem and Saul Lieberman have shown, reach back into Tannaitic <sup>days</sup> ~~times~~, claim legitimacy by building upon Ezekiel 1:26 which says, "Above the firmament that was over their [the Cherubim's] heads was the likeness of a throne, as the appearance of a sapphire stone; and upon the likeness of a throne was a likeness as the appearance of a man upon it above." What the authors of the Shi'ur Qoma texts did was to <sup>base</sup> ~~build~~ on this verse spe-

culations as to the measures of the body and the limbs of this "likeness of the appearance of a man," that is, of God. Thus, to give only one example, the height of the Creator if stated to be 236 times 10,000 celestial leagues, based on a numerological interpretation of Psalm 147:5 which, in literal translation, says, "Great is our Lord, and mighty in power." In this passage the sum total of the numerical values of the letters of the Hebrew words w'rav koah," that is, "and mighty in power," is 236. Scholem termed these teachings on the "measure of the body" of the Creator "a great enigma," but to me it seems that what these phantastic numbers wish to convey is actually a very simple and basic idea, namely that the greatness of God cannot be conceived by the human mind and cannot be expressed in numbers meaningful in a human context. The sequel of the verse quoted says "His understanding is infinite," and the Shi'ur Qoma authors tried to convey the idea of such an infinity by saying that the size of the divine body was 2,360,000 celestial leagues - an entirely unimaginable figure. let me mention here only in passing that a like tendency of naming a very great number in order to express or concretize the concept of the infinite is present in Hindu teachings which tell, e. g., about world-ages, the so-called "yugas," of a duration of 12,000 to hundreds of millions of years.<sup>8</sup>

The few facts referred to must suffice here as indications of the existence of a mystical trend in <sup>pre-Kabbala</sup> Judaism which for more than fifteen centuries after Ezekiel remained something like a subterranean ferment, and broke through to the surface only occasionally, causing short-lived tremors. It was not until the 12th century CE that Jewish mysticism powerfully manifested itself, first among the Jews of Germany, the so-called Haside Ashkenaz, or "the Pious of Germany," and soon thereafter among the Spanish Jews who had lived for centuries in a Muslim Arab environment and were influenced by the great intellectual and spiritual movements of Andalus.



The work of Nahmanides and Abulafia whom we have mentioned above prepared the ground among the Spanish Jews for the appearance of the Sefer haZohar, or "Book of Splendor," in the late 13th century. The Zohar, as it is usually referred to, was written by Moses de Leon (ca. 1240-1305), who first lived in the small Castilian town of Guadaljara northwest of Madrid, then, after some years of wandering, spent the last ten years of his life in Avila. He was the author of a considerable number of books on traditional religious subjects which, like the works of other Jewish authors of the period, were full of mystical allusions. Between about 1280 and 1286 de Leon produced his magnum opus, the Zohar, which subsequently acquired the position of the holiest book of the Kabbalists. De Leon wrote most of the Zohar in Aramaic (some of it in Hebrew), and, in order to make sure that it would be accepted as an authoritative work, he attributed its authorship to the second-century CE Palestinian Talmudic teacher Rabbi Shim'on ben Yohai, who already in talmudic times had the reputation of being a miracle worker. Such pseudographic attributions, as mentioned earlier, were nothing exceptional in antiquity and the Middle Ages.

It is difficult to present the essence of the Zohar within the compass of a brief statement.<sup>9</sup> It is a very long work - comprising some 850,000 words, or 1700 pages in the popular three-volume Vilna edition. Much of it is written in the form of a Kabbalistic Midrash, or mystical commentary, to sections of the Pentateuch, Song of Songs, Ruth, and Lamentations, and <sup>it</sup> is actually a composite of several books. Nowhere does it present a coherent or systematic doctrine, but repeats instead in a rather haphazard manner, all over its great bulk, a number of key ideas about the deity, the forces of evil, cosmology, man, and so forth.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, although the Zohar is the central and most influential formulation of early Kabbalistic thinking, it builds to a very great extent on its predecessors, and, in turn, had an

enormous influence on the subsequent development of the Kabbala. Hence, while one must keep in mind, as has been observed in the beginning of this paper, that there is no such thing as a single uniform Kabbalistic system but only many different Kabbalas, it is nevertheless more expedient to summarize the main teachings of "the Kabbala," despite the abstraction and schematization this involves, rather than those of the Zohar alone.

To begin with theology (or theosophy), in the Zoharic and other Kabbalistic systems God is a dynamic concept, presented as having gone through stages which today we would call evolutionary. However, these stages are also thought of as aspects of the deity. In one of his most basic aspects God is the absolute essence who lies beyond all speculation and even ecstatic comprehension. This unknowable aspect of the divine is expressed in the Hebrew term En Sof, that is, "Infinite." But, and here we run into our first major difficulty, it is also referred to as Ayin, "Nothing," because, as the rather lame explanation has it, no created being can intellectually comprehend it. According to some Kabbalist, this Nothing is the region of pure absolute Being; according to others, it is infinitely more real than all other reality. Still others refer to God in this state as dwelling "in the depths of nothingness." It is from this primal and mystical Nothingness that all the subsequent stages of God's gradual unfolding emanate, in the course of which the Nothing becomes the divine ego, the Hebrew word for which, as pointed out by some Kabbalists, is ANY, which is anagrammatically identical with AYN or Nothing.<sup>11</sup>

Those familiar with Hindu doctrines will recognize the similarity between this Kabbalistic primal Nothing and the teachings of the Satapatha Brahmana, according to which "The non-existent, verily, was here in the beginning." In the Shiva symbolism the God Shiva is the primal nothing, the absolute, the supreme void. Even the Hebrew play of words between Any and Ayin has its

Hindu analogue: the name Shiva, without the vowel element that converts the a into e, is Shava, corpse. Only by adding that element, which of course stands for Shiva's consort, the goddess Shakti (the supreme representative of movement and life), does the lifeless Nothing, Shava, become the god Shiva, full of life essence and energy.

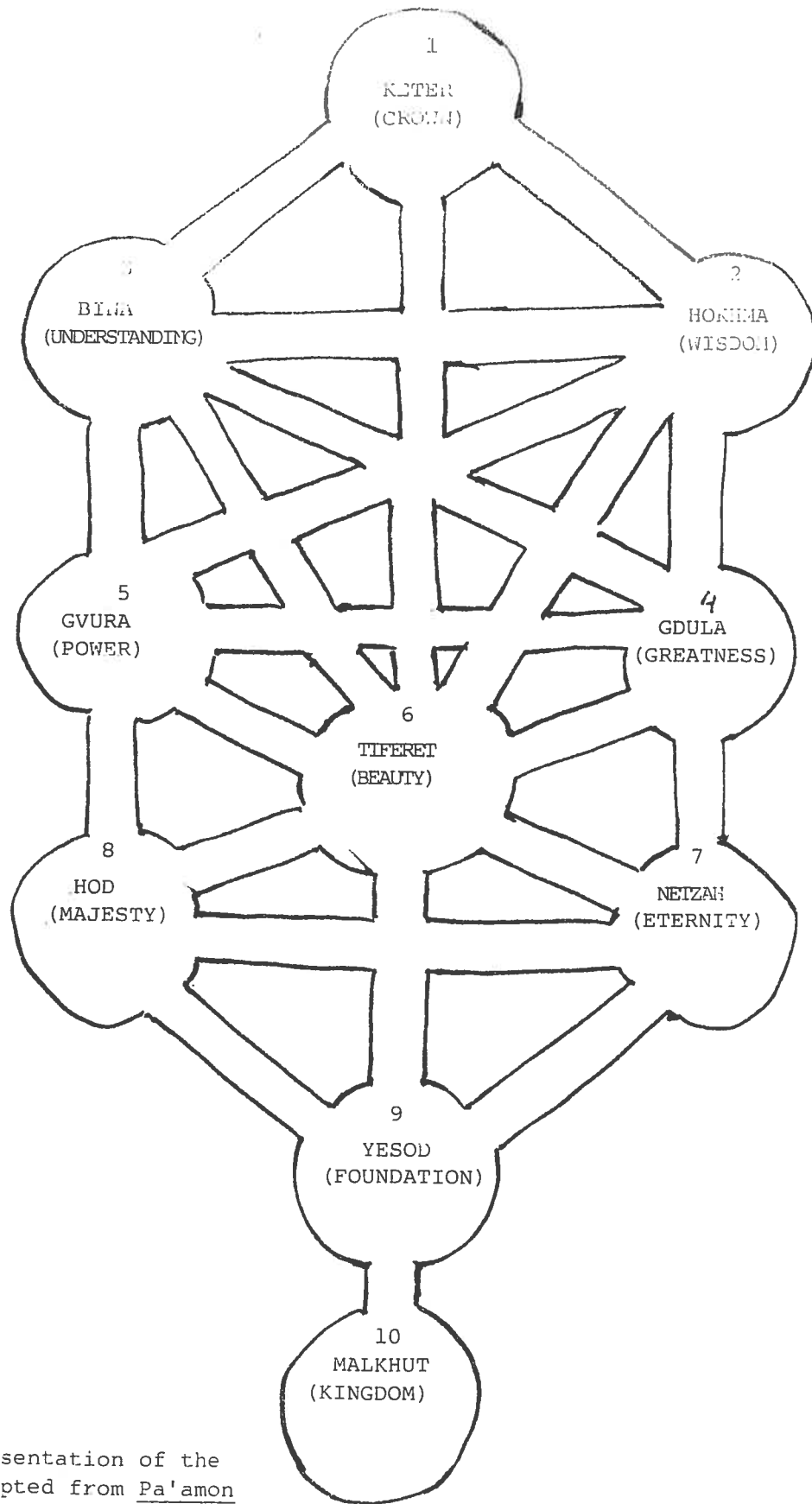
In Kabbalistic theogony-cosmogony the divine Primal Will is either separate from, or else identical with, the En Sof, the infinite. In any case, their joint manifestation is the first Sephira, or Emanation, named KETER, "Crown," which is still identical with the mystical Nothingness, the incomprehensible ~~parables~~ Absolute, and from which issues the first sexually differentiated and contraposed pair, Wisdom, who is the Supernal Father, and Intelligence, the Supernal Mother, in Hebrew Hokhma and Bina, who constitute the second and third Sephirot respectively. (As I go along presenting the basic Zoharic Kabbalistic doctrines it is most tempting to digress at each point and adduce their Hindu counterparts in Shivaism, but pressure of time and space don't allow me to do so. The reader is instead referred to the chapter "Kabbala and Hinduism," in my book The Jewish Mind, pp.134-151, which also deals with the question of how Hindu influences could have reached the Jewish Kabbalists in medieval Spain.)

We can mention only briefly the seven remaining Sephirot of the ten comprised in the Zoharic Kabbalistic theogony as they appear in most Kabbalistic systems. They are: (4) Mercy (or Greatness); (5) Power (or Judgment); (6) Compassion (or Beauty); (7) Eternity; (8) Majesty; (9) Foundation (or Righteous One); and (10) Kingdom (or Diadem). This theory, which ultimately goes back to the Sefer Yetzira, or "Book of Creation," the earliest extant Hebrew systematic speculative text <sup>dating from</sup> ~~the 1st century CE~~ the 2nd or 3rd centuries CE, and showing Gnostic influences, became the backbone of Spanish Kabbalistic teaching. The Sephirot are best described as intermediary states between God as the Emanator and all things that exist ~~apart from Him~~.

from Him, and thus represent the roots of all existence in the Creator.

The Sephirot are replete with manifold symbolism. They are frequently taken to be symbolic of the body of Adam Qadmon, the "Primordial Man." In graphic presentation they are usually arranged so that they show a vague resemblance to a human body (see figure on next page). The first three Sephirot represent the head; the fourth and fifth - the arms; the sixth - the torso; the seventh and eighth - the legs; the ninth - the male sexual organ; while the tenth refers either to the all-embracing totality of the image, or to the female companion of the male, since both together are needed to constitute the perfect man. As a contemporary of Moses de Leon, the Italian Kabbalist Menahem Recanati, put it, "all created things, earthly man and all other creatures in this world, exist according to the archetype (dugma) of the ten Sephirot."<sup>12</sup>

Of the ten Sephirot four stand in a special relationship to one another. They are: the second, Wisdom, referred to as the Supernal Father; the third, Intelligence, called the Supernal Mother; their son, the sixth Sephira, Compassion (or Beauty), termed in this context God the King; and finally their daughter, the tenth Sephira, Kingdom, called Shekhina, Matronit, or Community of Israel. These four aspects of the deity are represented, according to the Kabbala, in the letters of the Tetragrammaton, YHWH, the most sacred name of God. This Kabbalistic tetrad, as I called it, and especially the relationship between God the king and his spouse the Matronit, constitute, to my mind, the most fascinating aspect of the Zoharic doctrine, to which I devoted my book The Hebrew Goddess, and I feel frustrated that for lack of time I cannot go into it here. But I shall not forego quoting one passage which will give us an idea of the mythical tone in which the relationship between God and the Matron is presented in the Zoharic literature. The scene is set amidst the ruins of the temple of Jerusalem



Graphic Representation of the  
Sephirot. Adapted from Pa'amon  
v'Rimmon, Amsterdam, 1708.

which, before it was destroyed, served as the sacred bedchamber of God the King and his spouse the Matronit:

At midnight the Matronit enters that point of Zion which is <sup>the</sup> place of the Holy of Holies. She sees that it is in ruins, and that the house of her dwelling and her couch are defiled. She cries and laments, <sup>walks</sup> ~~goes~~ up and down, and looks at the place of the Cherubim. She cries in a bitter voice, lifts up her voice, and says: "My couch, my couch! The place of the House of my dwelling!... My bed! The couch of the Matronit!" She moans and sobs and cries: "My couch! Place of my ~~sanctuary~~ <sup>sanctuary</sup>! Place of precious pearls! The house of the [holy] Curtain and the lid of the Holy Ark, which was studded with sixty thousand ~~myriads~~ <sup>myriads</sup> of precious stones arranged in row after row and line after line, facing one another. Rows of pomegranates were spread over you toward the four winds. The world existed because of you. In you the Master of the World, my husband, would come to me, and would lie between my arms, and everything I wanted of Him, and all my requests, He fulfilled. At this time He would come to me, put His dwelling in me, and play betwixt my breasts. My couch, ~~my~~ <sup>my</sup> couch! Do you remember how <sup>would</sup> I ~~came~~ <sup>would</sup> come to you in joy and with gladness of heart, and those youths (the Cherubim) were coming to meet me, beating their wings in joy to receive me. (And now) the dust in you is rising from its place, and, see, how forgotten is the Ark of the Tora which was here. From here issued sustenance for the whole world, and light and blessing for all. I am looking for my Husband, but He is not here, I am looking everywhere. At this time my Husband would come to me surrounded by many pious youths, and all the maidens (accompanying me) were prepared to meet Him. And we would hear from afar the tinkling of pairs of bells on his feet, so that I should hear His voice even before He reached me. And all my maidens would praise and exalt the Holy One, blessed be He. And then all of them would go to their dwelling place, and we would embrace and (exchange) kisses of love. My Husband! My Husband!

Where did You go? This was the time when I would look at You. (But now) I look in every direction but You are not there. Where can I see You, where have I not searched for You? This is Your place to come to me at this hour. Behold, I am ready here. But woe, You have forgotten me! Do You not remember the days of love when I was lying in Your bosom, and I was impressed into Your form, and my form was impressed into You. Like unto this seal which leaves its imprint upon a page of writing, so did I leave my impress upon You, so that You play with my form while I am in the midst of my fort!" (And) she bursts into tears and cries: "My Husband! My Husband! The light of my eyes has become dark! Do You not remember how You would extend Your left arm under my head and I would enjoy Your strength, and Your right arm embraced me with love and kisses, and You vowed to me that You would never forsake my love, and said to me, 'If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand be forgotten!' And, woe, You have forgotten me!"<sup>13</sup>

In reading this moving passage it is indeed difficult to remember that it speaks, not of the pain of a woman abandoned by her lover, but of the yearning of one aspect of God to the other.

The next great development in Jewish mysticism took place in the 16th century in the small Galilean town of Safed. In that century Safed was the home of a splendid galaxy of Kabbalists, one of whom, Rabbi Yosef Caro (1488-1575), wrote the Shulhan 'Arukh ("The Set Table"), which to this day is considered the authoritative religio-legal code by tradition-abiding Jews. The dominant master of the Safed Kabbalists was Isaac Luria (1534-1572), who was born in Jerusalem, spent his youth in Egypt, studied the Zohar, lived for years as a hermit on an island in the Nile, and spent the last three years of his short life in Safed. After the death of his beloved master Moses Cordovero (1522-1570), Luria became the acknowledged leader of the Safed Kabbalists, among whom he had some thirty disciples, and

later came to be referred to as "the Holy Lion," the Hebrew word for lion, ari, containing the initials of Ashkenazi Rabbi Yitzhaq, i. e., Rabbi Isaac the Ashkenazi (he was of Ashkenazi extraction), or, according to others, of the words ha-Elohi rabbi Yitzhaq, or R. Isaac the divine. Like many another great religious leader or founder, Luria himself wrote next to nothing, but his teachings are known thanks to the voluminous writings of his foremost disciple Hayyim Vital (1543-1620).

Among the many teachings contained in Luria's kabbala I can discuss here only two: one doctrine and one practice. The doctrine is that of the Tzimtzum, or "contraction," which, put in the simplest form, teaches that prior to the Creation God filled the all; He was the En-Sof, the infinite, transcendent godhead. When God resolved to create the world, He had to make room for it, which He could do only by contracting Himself. Without the Tzimtzum there could have been no cosmic process; only God's withdrawal into himself created the pneumatic, primordial space that made possible the existence of something other than God and His pure essence.<sup>14</sup>

As interpreted by Hayyim Vital, the divine Tzimtzum was a free act of love that God undertook to be able to create the world. Since that time there is a twofold process between God and the world: there is the continuing, or perpetually renewed, contraction, on the one hand, and the outward flowing emanation in which is grounded every stage of being, on the other.

The practice that Lurianic Kabbala emphasizes above all is that of the kawwanot, or mystical concentrations, whose purpose is to bring about the yihud, or unification of the godhead. This is based on the zoharic doctrine of the disruption of the divine unity in consequence of the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem and the exile of the Shekhina (or Matronit) who is mystically identified with the Community of Israel. We have heard of the lament of the Matronit and her burning desire to be reunited with her husband, God the King. Luria taught, to put it again in the simplest possible



terms, that the reunification of God and the Matronit, yea the completeness, and thus the happiness, of God depended upon proper human behavior, upon the relationship between husband and wife, and, in particular, upon their performing the great and mysterious commandment of marital coupling at the traditionally prescribed times, and with the proper kawwana, concentration on its mystical significance. In addition Luria recommended many other kawwanot (pl.), which were collected and published in a book titled Sefer haKawwanot, or Book of Concentrations.<sup>15</sup> He proposed that one should perform practically all the religious commandments, the mitzvot, with the intention of bringing about the unification of God and the Shekhina, and, moreover, that prior to performing any of the mitzvot one should state explicitly that one does it in order to bring about a unification between those two separated aspects (or persons?) in the deity. In the Book of Concentrations he says: "One must ~~always~~ be careful always to say before everything (i. e., before performing any commandment), 'For the unification of the name of the Holy One, blessed be He, in fear and trembling and awe, <sup>all</sup> in the name of/Israel,' for one must always unite the male and the female..."<sup>16</sup>

The great authority of Luria secured rapid general acceptance of his "unifications" among both Sephardi and Ashkenazi Jews. Within a few decades after his death, they were included in a large number of prayer books printed all over Europe, while among the Jews in the Arab countries and the Muslim world the Lurianic version of the prayer book was the only one in use. With the rise of Hasidism in East Europe in the eighteenth century, the Lurianic prayer book became the one exclusively used by the Hasidim as well. All these prayer books contain numerous times the formula, "For the unification of the Holy One, blessed be he, and His Shekhina, in fear and in trembling, <sup>to</sup> to unite the Yah with the weh (the two halves of the divine name Yahweh), in a complete union, in the name of all Israel, (and) to raise up the Shekhina from the dust, behold I..." and then follows the reference to the

commandment one is about to perform, for instance, wrapping oneself in the tallith, the prayer shawl, or putting on the tefillin, the phylacteries, or beginning to study a religious treatise, etc. I made a rapid count in several of the most popular prayer books used in traditional communities and found that in the course of a year an observant Hasidic, Sephardi, and Oriental Jew recited the quoted formula some two thousand times. A more eloquent testimony to the lasting influence of Lurianic Kabbala on the Jewish masses until the spread of the 19th century Jewish enlightenment cannot be imagined. The psychological significance of the Lurianic doctrine of unifications lay in the fact that it made the simple, pious Jews aware of the importance of their behavior with reference to the great cosmic divine drama taking place on high, that it made them feel that they too had a share, however small, in alleviating the suffering of God by bringing Him and the Shekhina closer to each other. In the precarious situation in which the Jews found themselves in many places in the Diaspora in the 17th to 19th centuries <sup>(fs)</sup> beliefs such as these contributed an important factor of spiritual sustenance without which survival would have been even more difficult than it was.

Within a century after the great renaissance of Kabbalism that took place in 16th-century Safed and spread from there all over the Diaspora it served as the soil from which grew the messianic movement of Shabbatai Zevi (1626-1676) which engulfed practically all of Jewry. Another century later, East Europe, at the time the home of the overwhelming majority of the Jewish people, was the scene of yet another great Jewish mystical awakening, that of the Hasidic movement, initiated by Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov (ca. 1699-1760), or "the Besht," as he is usually referred to (from the initials of his name). Of the various doctrines of the Lurianic Kabbala with which the Besht was thoroughly familiar, he emphasized that of the

d'vegut, or "cleaving," which, as we saw earlier, had a long history in Jewish mysticism. But the Besht introduced a new element into the d'vegut-concept, that of hitlahavut, or "enthusiasm." He taught that man must serve God with joy, surrender oneself to Him with enthusiasm, so as to be enabled to give up the consciousness of separate existence and be joined to the eternal being of God. <sup>עֵוָה</sup> ~~From~~ this brief statement it is clear that the Hasidism of the Besht was indeed a sea-change from the Talmudic rigorism that dominated East European Jewish life, and even from Kabbalism, both of which held up immersion in the study of religious literature as the highest ideal of Jewish life. Hasidism taught that knowledge of Talmudic, halakhic, and Kabbalistic literature was not a primary requirement for a good and full Jewish life. What one must instead aspire to achieve was the ability to cleave to God with joyful enthusiasm.

The Hasidic doctrine had, however, one further consequence for the internal organization of Jewish life in East Europe. It taught that, since most men cannot on their own achieve the desirable high state of spiritual union with God, they need the intermediacy of the Tzaddiq, the saintly religious leader, who served as a connecting link between the Creator and Creation. The Tzaddiq, as his image developed in Hasidism, became a starets-like figure. Like the Starets in the Russian Orthodox Church, so the Tzaddiq in Hasidism, was believed to be a miracle-working<sup>g</sup> holy man, who had a direct link to God, and was able to submit to God human requests with his effective recommendation.

These, in their barest outline, are some of the most important facets of Hasidism. Its immediate psychological effect was an enormous uplift for the downtrodden masses of East European Jews for whom the new doctrine opened up a road to self-assurance, <sup>to</sup> a belief in their own worth, to ecstatic experience, and to an existence in which joyous trust in God and His Tzaddiq introduced a ray of light into an otherwise drab and sad existence.

After the death of the Besht (1760), his disciple Dov Ber of Mezi<sup>h</sup>re<sup>h</sup>ch (d. 1772) succeeded him as the leader, systematized the Hasidic teachings, and brought them in line with the Lurianic Kabbala. By the end of the 18th century Hasidism had spread all over Lithuania, White Russia, Volhynia, the Ukraine, Podolia, Bessarabia, Poland, Galicia, and eastern Hungary, with the result that, on the eve of the Jewish Enlightenment (the so-called <sup>2</sup> Haskala), Jewry was divided into two opposing camps, that of the Hasidim, and that of the Mitnagdim ("Opponents"). Hasidism itself soon broke up into competing schools, each headed by its own Tzaddiqim, several of whom became the founders of dynasties, some of which (e. g., those of the Belzer, Lubavicher, Munkacher, etc. rabbis) survive to this day in <sup>1</sup> The United States and in Israel.

The Hasidic rabbis and their disciples have produced a huge volume of literature, estimated at more than 3,000 works. The success of Hasidism as a religious movement can be measured by several yardsticks: one is that Hasidism totally absorbed the older Kabbalism everywhere in the Jewish world with the exception of the Sephardi and Oriental Jewish minorities among whom one can still find non-Hasidic Kabbalists. Another mark of the success of Hasidism is that it managed to survive the bitter attacks directed against it by its Rabbinic opponents, the Mitnagdim. The third is that ~~it is~~ to this day, despite the spread of the Jewish Enlightenment, religious Reform, ~~and~~ assimilation to modern Western culture, and the growth of political and secular Zionism, <sup>it</sup> has remained a vital and vibrant Jewish religious trend the numbers of whose adherents are on the increase. The mystical kawwanot, "concentrations," and yihudim, "unifications," discussed above, are still live concerns among the Hasidim who in their prayers and rites scrupulously follow the centuries-old traditional rituals.

In this connection mention must be made at least in passing of the work of Martin Buber (1878-1965), whose religious philosophy, which com-

prises a modern reinterpretation of Hasidism, often taking the form of retelling of Hasidic tales, brought him considerable recognition, especially among Christian religious thinkers.

In conclusion we must face a question crucial to a proper understanding of the position of Jewish mysticism within the/wider framework of Jewish monotheism. It is this: in view of what can only be termed the stubborn persistence through millennia of the tenet that the deity comprises male and female aspects, or even components, is one justified in considering Judaism strictly monotheistic? Does it not appear that in this respect Judaism is closer to trinitarian Christianity and Catholic Mariolatry than to Islam with its uncompromising insistence on the <sup>indi</sup>visible oneness of God? The question is difficult to formulate, and much more difficult to answer.

Judaism, although it never broke up into independent denominations (in this respect it again resembles Islam more than Christianity), comprises a broad range of disparate trends from Reform Judaism to ultra-orthodox Hasidism. Hence it is almost impossible to formulate a brief characterization which would be valid across the entire spectrum of Jewish religious manifestations. My concluding observations will, therefore, have ~~to be~~ <sup>reference</sup> ~~confined~~ <sup>only</sup> to those branches of Judaism which have/ <sup>been</sup> in the past, or are at present, knowledgeable about, and influenced by, the/mystical doctrine of the Shekhina, and in whose religious thinking and practice the "unifications" have played or do play a part. The God concept of these circles can be seen as reflecting an ongoing credal and psychological struggle between the inviolate tenet of the one God as recited daily in the biblical Sh'ma prayer, the solemn Jewish confession of faith, on the one hand, and, on the other, the psychological imperative of finding a reflection of the human condition in the Deity, of establishing a correspondence between human bisexuality and the realm of the divine, and demonstrating a the existence of a mutuality between the acts and events in human life and

those taking place On High. The important role played by the "unifications" in the daily religious life of these circles forces upon us the conclusion that for them the presence in the deity of a male "Holy One, blessed be He" and a female "Shekhina" is an undoubted, accepted given, even though they may not be fully aware of the theological implications of such a view. On the other hand, the same believers also persevere, of course, in reciting several times every day the Sh'ma<sup>l</sup> prayer, the basic Jewish credo, which proclaims that "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one" (Deut. 6:4), and do so with putting the greatest possible stress on the word "one." They also recite the Thirteen Articles of the Faith formulated by Maimonides, one of which states that "I believe with a complete faith that the Creator, blessed be His name, is one, and there is no oneness like His, in any manner, and He alone is our God, who was, is, and will be."

Fortunately for the mental peace of those who recite both formulas, they are rarely if ever aware of the contradiction contained in them. Their position is that the ancient masters have grappled with these problems which are too difficult for us latecomers to face, and it is our duty to accept unquestioningly whatever solutions the old teachers arrived at. That God is one is an <sup>n</sup>unassailable basic tenet of faith for all branches and varieties of Judaism, while to most Jews the "unifications" and the doctrines of male and female in the deity that underlie them are unknown. The few who do know them consider them as mysteries that elude the grasp of the average believer, which position parallels that of the Christian laymen who know of the three persons in the one God and accept it as a mystery beyond human understanding.

Notes

1. As quoted by Louis Duprè, "Mysticism," in The Encyclopedia of Religion, New York: Macmillan, 1987, 10:246.
2. Op. cit., p. 258.
3. Evelyn Underhill, Mysticism, 1911; 12 ed. 1930, p. 81.
4. Heinrich Graetz, History of the Jews, Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, <sup>1874</sup>~~1984~~, 4: 12, 14-16, 23, 626.
5. Kaufman Kohler and Louis Ginzberg, "Cabala," in Jewish Encyclopedia, published from 1901 on, 3:456ff., 478a, 479a.
6. Gershom Scholem, "Kabbalah," in Encyclopedia Judaica, Jerusalem: Keter Publ. House, 10: 489-653.
7. Louis Duprè, "Mysticism," in Encyclopedia of Religion, 10:259b.
8. Raphael Patai, The Jewish Mind, New York: Scribner's, 1977, p. 148.
9. The difficulty is well illustrated by the fact that the long article by Scholem in the Encyclopedia Judaica, 16:1193-1215, s. v. Zohar, does not contain a summary of the contents/of the Zohar.  
or teaching .
10. The main teachings of the Zohar have been systematized in a Hebrew translation by Y. Tishby and F. Lachover, Mishnat haZohar, 2 vols., Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1957-61. <sup>U</sup>But even they refrain from attempting to give a summary of the contents of the Zohar, and confine themselves instead<sup>d</sup> to individual introductions to each of the subjects into which they group the material, e. g., The Infinite, The Sephirot, the Shekhina, etc.
11. Gershom Scholem, Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism, New York: Schocken Books, 1961, pp.257, 217; idem, On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism, New York: Schocken Books<sup>9</sup>, 1965, p. 102.
12. Scholem, Major Trends, p. 109; On the Kabbalah, pp. 100, 101; Menahem Recanati, Ta'ameh Mitzvot ("Meaning of the Commandments"), Basel, 1581, 3a.
- ~~13. Midrash haNe'elam on Lamentations, p. 7.~~

13. Midrash haNe'elam on Lamentations, Zohar Hadash, with the Sullam commentary, vol. 21, Tel Aviv, 1965, pp. 15-17.
14. Cf. Scholem, On the Kabbalah, pp. 111-12.
15. Sefer haKawwanot, Venice, 1620; Constantinople, 1720; etc.
16. Op. cit., p. 23a.