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# Religion and Mysticism

## The Case of Judaism

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Judaism is a religious tradition that has been studied, both by its practitioners from within and by observers from without, for a great many centuries. Despite this fact, our view of Judaism has changed radically within the past hundred or even fifty years. This transformation is due in no small part to the rediscovery and reintegration of Jewish mysticism into our picture of the whole. All those definitions of Judaism so popular in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, whether by "essential spirit," by a few "irreducible principles," or as "ethical monotheistic nationhood" meet their match as they confront the great variety of evidence that research into Jewish mysticism has unearthed.

The term "mysticism" in the history of religions has been victim of a frequent murkiness of definition, one that, as some would say, is appropriate to its subject matter. Our problem in speaking of *Jewish* mysticism is an especially delicate one. Take the most narrow and precise definitions of the subject currently available in the intellectual marketplace (mysticism as an utter absorption within and identification with the deity), and we have very little about which we can write. With a few notable exceptions, such formulas are lacking in the canon of Jewish spiritual writings. Indeed this lack has misled some serious scholars of comparative mysticism to dismiss Judaism, seeing it as the most ab-

solutely "Western" of all religions, in which the transcendence of God is so complete that the mystical spirit is simply unable to flourish. This judgment, as we shall see presently, is far from the truth. Take, on the other hand, a wide-ranging definition of mysticism (a religion of inner experience and intimacy with God), and we find that we can exclude very little of Judaism from our purview. Surely the Psalms are mystical by this definition, as are the prophets, the rabbis, and such differing later figures as Maimonides and Martin Buber. When the definition is this broad, we must question its usefulness: over against what other phenomena does mysticism, so defined, stand? What other phenomena does the definition help us to delineate? The answer is difficult, unless we resort to the old stereotypes about "true" or "inner" religion as opposed to "mere" priestly religion or devotion to legal forms. Such a distinction, totally alien to the Jewish experience, serves primarily to judge rather than to explain, and its prejudices are too obvious to require further comment.

In what sense is it, then, that we shall speak of "mysticism"? Let me propose, for our purposes, a working definition, one that takes a middle ground but seems to serve well the textual evidences of the Jewish sources. I shall speak here of mysticism as a religious outlook that: (1) seeks out inner experience of the divine, and to that end generally cultivates the life of inwardness; (2) longs to recover an original intimacy with God, the loss of which is essential to the ordinary human condition; and (3) involves itself with an esoteric lore that promises both to reveal the inner secrets of divinity and to provide access to the restoration of divine/human intimacy.

Such a definition will perforce limit our consideration to Judaism as a postbiblical phenomenon, and this is quite intentional. Biblical religion (we speak here of the Hebrew Bible, but the statement would apply to the Christian Scriptures as well) is not yet fraught with the overwhelming sense of God's distance and the need to traverse it that is to so characterize later mystics. While the biblical God is indeed transcendent, he can and frequently does choose to manifest his presence quite directly within the human realm. This is true for the people of Israel collectively, in the wilderness shrine and then in the Temple, as well as for the prophets and heroes in their individual encounters with divinity. Though the God of Israel had been proclaimed universal and transcendent, biblical man still held fast to those legacies of earlier religion, both cultic and mantic, that allowed him to evoke the Presence. In this sense the essential rites were not esoteric, and no separate or "inner" reading of the traditions was needed in order to find their true meaning.

There is no single figure or document that we may describe as "typical" of the Jewish mystical tradition. In fact we are dealing not with a single tradition but with a variety of teachings, a wide range of per-

sonalities, and a complex series of historical phenomena that span some two thousand years. Mysticism, even within the scope of our definition, contains room for a broad spectrum of religious experiences and ways of conveying them. The case of Judaism should help us understand that no single doctrine or experiential typology can exhaust the mysticism of a particular tradition. On the contrary, religious types are cross-traditional, and this includes aspects of their mystical experiences. Though cultural limitations would likely prevent both from declaring so, a Hasidic master in his community might have more in common with a Sufi master than he would with an ancient Jewish apocalyptic visionary. To document this claim we shall turn, in the second part of this essay, to an examination of four very different literary sources found in Jewish mystics of various schools and times. But first some general remarks are in order, beginning with a brief historical mapping of these schools, so that the reader may have some temporal perspective in which to see the examples we shall offer.

From the first three or four centuries of the common era, the period when rabbinic Judaism itself was yet in formation, we have evidence of several sorts of mystical/occult activity, chiefly in the Land of Israel. These seem to have centered around mystical flights or inner "descents" into the divine throne room and visions of God as surrounded by his heavenly retinue. Such flights were induced by chants and incantations; the initiate was allowed to pass on to each succeeding stage of the journey only by possession of some secret knowledge, often the name of the angel who guarded that particular rung of the heavens. The documents that we have from these circles include accounts of the journey, ecstatic hymns, and descriptions of what appears to be an envisioned gigantic "body" of the Creator. There is much in this literature that is reminiscent of other late Hellenistic mysteries and the Gnostic circles that abounded in the later Roman empire, and an extensive scholarly literature exists on the subject of this "Jewish Gnosticism." We also possess a clearly magical literature that is closely related in date, form, and language to this mystical corpus. Here the angels and principalities are invoked not for permission to continue on the beatific journey but for some worldly good they can perform for the one who has the power of their secret names. In general it may be said that rigid distinctions between mysticism and magic, or even between magic and religion, once popular among historians of religion, are not borne out by the Jewish sources.

The sort of visionary-mysticism we are discussing had a long history in Jewish circles. While its roots clearly go back to late antiquity (individual texts are extremely hard to date in this very slow-changing literature), we have evidence that it was still practiced in Mesopotamia in the tenth century C.E. Of its later history in the Near East we know little, but

sources and traditions were imported to Europe, perhaps via Italy, in the tenth or eleventh century. Thence they were incorporated into a new sort of mystical pietism, one that flourished in the Jewish communities along the Rhine in the ensuing centuries. This movement of "German Hasidism" is surely related in type to the piety of the monastic reforms that characterized Franco-German Christianity in the same period. Outwardly the teaching was essentially a moralistic one, its achievement the promulgation of a religious folk-ethic that was to dominate Ashkenazic (northern European) Jewry for many centuries to come. The core of this revival was nurtured, however, by a speculative spirit, one that combined the older visionary traditions with early medieval philosophy to create an esoteric doctrine of its own. Unlike the earlier mystical sources, this tradition was an exegetical one, combing passages of Scripture in search of some hint as to their greater secret. Angels, demons, and the "Glory," a created form to be distinguished from God himself, were central subjects of these speculations. It is a certain aspect of this Glory, claim the pietists, which is the object of visionary experience, the ultimate reward for the life of righteousness. Thus, to say it all too briefly, are the moralistic, speculative, and visionary aspects of a mystical revival combined in the German Hasidic movement.

\* Toward the middle of the twelfth century, contemporaneous with the rise of this movement in northern Europe, there develops a parallel phenomenon, first in southern France along the Pyrenees, and then in northern Spain. This mystical movement among Spanish Jews, a bit later given the name "Kabbalah," was to become, from a doctrinal point of view, the major source for all later Jewish mysticism. It may be characterized as a symbolic-speculative movement, one that sought to pierce beyond the bounds of ordinary intellectual endeavor by the promulgation of a new symbolic language, one that was rooted, so the Kabbalists claimed, in realms of divine reality that were outside the reach of both philosophy and language. Their efforts centered around the ten *sefirot*, a series of symbol clusters that represented both the succeeding stages in the ongoing self-revelation of the hidden Godhead and the steps the adept might take (for their structure permeates all of reality, including the soul) in the attempt to return to him. By "symbol clusters" we mean that a group of well-known objects or realities are placed together and represent the same stage in the divine world. That "rung," itself inexpressible, is then understood by association with the symbols that represent it. One such aspect of divinity, for example, is that which might best be referred to as "Understanding/Mother/Womb/Palace/Jubilee/End/Persimmon/Upper Garden/World-to-Come/Repentance/Joy". A few other terms could be added to the list. For convenience, this aspect of divinity is called by the single name *binah* (understanding). The mystic was to con-

template the associations, seeing them both in the words of Scripture and in the happenings of human life. Such contemplation was to create a new attitude of mind, one in which the symbolic consciousness was to supplant ordinary thinking as the chief focus of the adept's mental life, leading him ever to rise higher, or penetrate more deeply, into a world of unending mystery.

The writings of the Kabbalists contain elements of both the visionary and the moralistic-pietistic strands, though both of these have now been subsumed within the greater theosophical or speculative interests of the Kabbalah. Visionary experience is surely possible, insofar as the Kabbalists are concerned, but its object is a lower "world" than that attained by constant and disciplined contemplation of the *sefirot*, and is thus of lesser value. The *Zohar*, the central work of the Spanish Kabbalah, has its own moralistic spirit and is quite filled with pious preachings, though these are generally original only insofar as they are interwoven with the speculative aspects of the work. Even among the Kabbalists of the thirteenth century, we should add, many of whom knew one another and were influenced by one another's work, there were many types. Some were poets, using the symbolic imagination to soar more freely than ordinary prose would have permitted; others were systematizers, commentators who sought to reread all of earlier Judaism in the Kabbalistic spirit, or apologists and fighters against rational philosophy. Some of course combined several of these elements, making their works rich sources of inspiration for centuries to come.

The next major revival of the Jewish mystical spirit took place in the sixteenth century, centered in a small circle in the Galilean town of Safed. Here gathered children of refugees who had fled Spain after the expulsion of 1492, along with Jews from several of the Near Eastern countries. In the self-contained environment of this small community, a revival took place in several areas of Jewish intellectual activity, most particularly in the cultivation of the spiritual life and the study of mysticism. Once again we see that very different types of mystical figures were present within the same small circle. There is a strong occultist strain in much of Safed mysticism, however, and it was to the most abstruse and often half-forgotten documents of earlier ages that these mystics looked for inspiration. It was here that the belief in reincarnation, long held by certain Kabbalists, took on great importance, as disciples claimed for their masters the ability to determine who each of the circle had been in his previous life on earth.

The dominant teaching to emerge from Safed was that of Isaac Luria (1534-72). His path, as preserved in the writings of his disciples, was one of infinitely detailed and refined meditations, in which the *sefirot* were replaced by a series of ever moving and changing configurations that made

up the contemplative cosmos. Successive meditations on each stage of the emerging universe were to constitute collectively the rebuilding or "repair" of that universe; the theurgic aspect of Kabbalah, that which claimed an external effect for man's contemplative activity, was here much emphasized. This sense of a cosmos reestablished, the divine harmony restored by action in the meditative realm, was fully integrated with the ancient messianic imagery of Judaism and lent to mysticism a kind of redemptive urgency that it had not always known. The life of the individual contemplative or visionary was now bound up with the fate of the universe as a whole; his own strivings for God, the dream of Israel of being redeemed from exile, and the universal longing for the restored harmony of life before the Fall (or before Creation) were now joined together. It is no wonder that the Lurianic movement served as the religious impulse for the most widespread and devastating messianic movement in Jewish history, that which centered around Sabbatai Sevi in the mid- and late seventeenth century. The followers of the Sabbatian messiah created their own occultist doctrine, one in which Kabbalistic meditations and faith in the new messiah combined in the startling assertion that Sabbatai was himself a divine being, the kingship of God incarnate. The fact that certain of the Sabbatian leaders had themselves been educated as Catholics in Spain, where their families had remained as secret Jews in defiance of the Inquisition, surely had something to do with this surprising outgrowth of the Kabbalistic tradition.

Throughout their earlier history, the various mysticisms growing out of Judaism had been essentially elitist in character. The doctrines were difficult, the style of the sources abstruse, and circles that studied them always relatively small and restricted. While something of the mystics' spirit had, in each movement, penetrated into the wider society through liturgy, ascetic practice, or manner of thought, the true meaning of these innovations remained the secret of the few. For the broader populace, including many intellectuals, mystics were more to be revered than understood. From the sixteenth century on, however, this situation was dramatically altered. The revival in Safed caught the imagination of preachers and storytellers among Jews in both Europe and the Near-East; and various popularized versions of Kabbalistic teaching and practice became widespread. This took place both before and after the Sabbatian episode, and multiform versions of the union between mystical devotion and messianic awakening are to be found, especially on the popular level. The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the period just preceding the advent of modernity and social emancipation in Jewish history, was the era in which mysticism had its greatest influence on the collective religious consciousness of Jewry.

A particular form of this popular mystical revivalism is that called

Hasidism (a name shared with several religious movements in Jewish history), as it developed in Russia and Poland toward the latter decades of the eighteenth century. Hasidism rejected the complex meditational exercises which earlier mystics had deemed necessary to effect redemption. It also tended to set aside the ascetic regimen and harsh view of human nature that had been its joint legacy from the Safed revival and the old Ashkenazic tradition. Instead it preached a more nearly pantheistic vision, one in which all things contained the presence of God; or, in a somewhat different formulation, nothing truly existed but God himself and all else was his external garb, hiding him from the unenlightened but dissolving in the face of true awareness. This essentially simple message was one of great power; Hasidism attracted more of a mass following than any similar movement in Jewish history, save possibly Sabbatianism in its first years. The religious teaching of Hasidism was borne by a series of charismatic leaders who were seen by their followers as current manifestations of the *zaddiq* ideal, that of the "righteous" or holy man, a figure with ancient roots in the folk imagination of Jewry. These *zaddiqim* were at once teachers of spiritual enlightenment, intercessors in prayer, and channels through which divine light and blessing were said to flow into the world. In the phenomenology of Hasidism it is impossible to separate these elements; here still, as in the earliest flowering of Jewish mysticism, the sublime and the quasi-magical remain bound together.

Such, in briefest outline, are the major historical dimensions within which our subject has existed. Countless individuals and substrata have here been neglected, of course, as have the various attempts to continue or reconstitute a Jewish mysticism in our own times. Our concern is with major movements on the historical scene, as well as with distinctive typologies of mystical life that are to be found within Judaism. Before we turn to the latter, however, there are a few general points about the place of mysticism within Jewish history that need to be made.

The endeavor that we have defined as mystical accompanies Judaism throughout the successive stages of its development. The religion of institutions, ceremonies, and law that so preoccupies the rabbis can in no period be fully separated from the life of the spirit that quickens it. From earliest rabbinic times, the names of such well-known teachers of exoteric Judaism as Yohanan ben Zakkai and Akiba are associated as well with the mystic lore of their time. While such associations are hard to prove for this early period, it is certainly the case that for such figures as Moses Nahmanides in medieval Spain and Joseph Caro in Safed that preoccupation with the law and insight into the mysteries went hand in hand. The same may be said of such Hasidic leaders as the rabbis of Gur and Lubavitch, who were considered legal authorities of the first rank, even by those who opposed their Hasidism. There were many others in Jewish

history, including both the author of the *Zohar* and the Ba'al Shem Tov, the first central figure of latter-day Hasidism, whose energies were devoted wholly to the mystical/spiritual endeavor and who manifested a traditionally respectable, but not specialized, knowledge of the law. These too, however, lived wholly within the domain of legally sanctioned Jewish practice. The picture of mystics and rabbis at odds with one another reflects the exception rather than the rule in Jewish history.

But this tells only half the story. True, most mystics were traditionalists, and mysticism was used more than once in defense of traditional religious practice against some perceived threat. At the same time, there is a subtle shift of values that takes place as Judaism is given a mystical cast. The *will* of God, as manifest in the activist stance of a Judaism above all loyal to the commanding words of Torah, now must share center stage with the *being* or *presence* of God that the mystic seeks out or has come to know. The mediated quality of rabbinic religion, Israel related to God through Torah, has in a sense been inadequate to the needs of its most wholehearted devotees. From the mystic's point of view, claim as he may that all levels of the Torah's meaning are simultaneously valid and uncontradictory, it is clear that the *true* meaning, in some specially emphatic sense, is that of the secret tradition. In this sense it must be said that a certain ambivalence toward the exoteric tradition, despite great and sincere protestations of loyalty, accompanies Jewish mysticism through its history.

Whatever beliefs we may hold as to the ultimate oneness of mystical experience, the testimony of mystics as we find it is always colored by the particular cultural contexts within which they have lived. It is no surprise, then, to note that a great deal of Jewish esotericism is *intellectual* in nature. The object of the mystic's search, for most of the Kabbalistic sources, is the *knowledge* of God. True, this knowing is of an intimate, sometimes even unitive, character. But the highest states of mystical attachment and rapture remain closed before the one who does not know. This was already the case in the earliest visionary literature, where proper knowledge of an angel's name or a mysterious password was vital to surviving the heavenly journey. Kabbalah in the Middle Ages may be said to represent a maturation of this Gnostic stance, one in which the "secret" lore has taken on aspects of the search for wisdom and profundity. The highest triad of the *sefirot*, in a well-known Kabbalistic system, is that of *hokhmah*, *binah*, and *da'at*, or wisdom, understanding, and knowledge. Here the descent into the mystical realm is one of reaching out for ever more refined levels of mind, seeking that inner place where the mind of God will be joined to the most rarified human intellect. In this sense the Kabbalah is very much influenced by the contemplative vision of medieval philosophy; rather than speaking of mysticism and philosophy



as two separate domains, as we often do, we might best think in terms of rational and esoteric traditions in the Middle Ages, the two seeking the same goal of intimate knowledge of God. Even for latter-day Hasidism, where a certain anti-intellectual strain is to be noted, *da'at*, or knowing awareness, remains crucial to the religious mind. Only the one who comes to know that all contains His presence can truly participate in the ecstatic worship that is the Hasidic community's hallmark. The transformation of mind, called for by many of the Kabbalistic and Hasidic masters, required, first, mind's highest cultivation.

This intellectual character is also manifest in the essential activity that we see preoccupying the Kabbalist, that of study and interpretation. Here the mystics remained fully within the value-system of the postrabbinic world, though using it to their own ends. Tremendous learning, and not only of the esoteric kind, is manifest in the major works of the Kabbalah, an effort that essentially involved a reinterpretation of the entire Jewish tradition, including the Bible itself, in a new spirit. No wonder then that the majority of mystical treatises take the form of commentaries, at least in the loosest sense of that word: Delving into the word of Scripture, seeking out the secret meanings God had hidden in it for the elect of times to come, is the contemplative exercise which the Jewish sources of all periods most widely attest.

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Bearing these general remarks in mind, we turn now to an examination of four figures whom we find in the mystical literature of Judaism. Each of these ideal types is illustrated by a text, followed by some words of commentary. The sampler of sources offered here is taken from the widest range of sources, historically as well as typologically, and is fully intended to whet the reader's appetite for further study. Our types, the *heavenly voyager*, the *lover of God*, the *symbolmaker*, and the *holy man*, are to be found throughout the medieval and later literature. They are complementary rather than exclusive with respect to one another. Indeed, we could without great difficulty find texts from many a single Kabbalistic author that would illustrate all four.

### *The Heavenly Voyager*

The literary sources of early Jewish visionary or *Merkavah* (literally "chariot") mysticism are a series of fragmentary accounts, preserved mostly in manuscripts through the ages, and edited by scholars only in the course of the past century. Some of these texts are very nearly incomprehensible, written in difficult and badly preserved code. Others

break off at crucial points, the voyager or author seemingly so overwhelmed by ecstasy that he loses the ability to speak; thus do the sources seek to convey a sense of ineffability about that which they otherwise describe in words. Only in a relatively few cases do we have whole accounts of such visions, recorded in a way that the reader can understand. One of these more complete accounts is translated here. Its source is the *Merkavah Rabbah*, composed possibly in the fourth or fifth century, and printed in the collection *Merkavah Shelemah*, published in Jerusalem in 1921. The speaker, using the name of Rabbi Ishmael, has been transported into the heavenly palaces:

Rabbi Ishmael recounted:

Sasgiel, angel of the countenance, said to me: "My beloved, be seated in my bosom and I shall tell you what will become of Israel." I sat in his bosom and he began to cry; tears flowed from his eyes and fell down upon me. I addressed him: "My glorious brightness! Why are you crying?" He responded: "Come, I shall bring you in and show you what is in store for Israel, the holy people." He took me by the hand and led me through chamber within chamber, secret place within secret place, into the treasuries. There he took the account-books and showed me written tales of woe, one worse than the other. I asked for whom these were prescribed, and he said "For Israel." I responded: "Israel can stand up to these." But he said: "Come tomorrow and I will tell you of troubles yet worse than these." The next day he took me through the secret places and the inner chambers and showed me troubles more horrendous than the first. Many were to die, some by sword and some by famine. Others were to be taken into captivity. I said to him: "My glorious brightness! Have Israel sinned so badly?" "Each day," he answered me, "new decrees are issued, more terrible than these. But when Israel go into their synagogues and houses of study to say 'Amen, May His great name be blessed,' we do not allow the decrees to come forth from the innermost chambers."

As I left him, I heard a voice calling out in the Aramaic language, saying: "O Temple, Temple for destruction, and palace for burning fire! The joy of the king will be disgraced, his sons killed . . . \* the virgins despoiled. The pure altar will be defiled; the table set at the gates of Jerusalem and the Holy Land will tremble."

When I heard this loud voice I was taken aback and silenced. I was about to fall faint when Hadariel the angel came and restored my spirit. He stood me up and asked me what had happened. I said to him: "O glorious exalted one! Is there no redemption for Israel?" He replied: "Come, let me take you into the treasuries of consoling and salvation." There I saw groups of angels sitting and weaving garments of salvation, fashioning crowns of life and fixing precious stones and pearls into them. They were smelling fragrant spices and sweetening

\* The text is here incomprehensible and probably corrupt.

wine for the righteous. I saw one crown finer than all the others; sun, moon; and the twelve constellations were all engraved in it. I asked: "O glorious exalted one! For whom are these crowns?" And he replied, "For Israel." "And for whom is that especially magnificent crown?" "For David, King of Israel." I said: "O glorious brightness! Show me his glory." "My beloved," he replied, "wait here three hours until David arrives, and then you will see his greatness." He grabbed hold of me and kept me in his bosom. "What do you see?" he asked me. I told him: "I see seven bolts of lightning, dancing about as one." "Hide your eyes," he said, "that you not be too shaken by these, which have come out to greet David."

Then all the wheels and Seraphim, the treasuries of snow and of hail, constellations, stars, angels, and fiery flames of heaven were aroused and proclaimed: "For the choirmaster, a Psalm of David." I heard a sound coming forth from Eden, calling out: "May the glory of God be forever!" And there was David, leading the procession, all the kings of his lineage walking behind him. Each had a crown on his head, but the crown of David outshone them all, its brilliance radiating from one end of the world to the other. When David arrived at the highest chamber of heaven, his throne was awaiting him: a throne of fire, five hundred miles high, and double that in width and breadth. Once David was seated on his throne, facing the throne of his Creator, all the kings of the house of David seated before him and all the kings of Israel standing behind him, he stood up and sang hymns and praises the like of which no ear has ever heard. Once he said: "May the Lord rule forever," Metatron and all his host recited: "Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of Hosts." The holy beings called forth in praise: "Blessed is the glory of the Lord from His place!" The heavens called out: "May the Lord rule forever!" and all the kings of the House of David responded: "The Lord shall be King over all the earth!"

Happy is the eye that has seen it, happy the man who has merited this. Happy is his mother who received him, the breasts at which he nursed, the womb in which he grew. Happy is the Torah that he studied, the understanding he attained. Happy are the arms that have embraced him, the peace he has pursued. Happy is the eye that has seen him. Happy you, Ishmael, for you have merited this.

The report, though narrated in the name of a certain "Ishmael," is essentially anonymous. It is typical of these sources that they use a well-known rabbinic name, most often either Akiba or Ishmael, but these ascriptions are not to be taken literally. The concluding paragraph, typical of these sources in their complete form, represents a series of formulas ("happy" could as well be rendered "blessed") by which the ecstatic passion of the account itself is cooled down before the text is brought to a close.

Perhaps the most remarkable feature of these *merkavah* accounts is the way something of the intense experience is preserved in the telling of

the tale. Here we have no mystic's complaint about the inadequacy of language or the impossibility of true communication. We are confronted rather with a skillful writer, one who has been able to recreate in his narrative the dramatic excitement and intense pace of ecstatic experience. It is impossible for us to know, of course, how wholly and literally such a narrative corresponds to a single inner event in the mystic's life and how much it may be embellished by the literary imagination. In dealing with such realms, however, attempts on our part to distinguish "experience," as though it could be fully isolated, from fantasy and imagination will not lead far. The mystic lives, writes, and "experiences" within a world that knows its own literary conventions and traditional figures of the imaginative fancy.

Indeed, the traditional character of this text is one that makes it of special interest. Sometimes it is thought that these *merkavah* experiences are of an entirely private sort, bearing no relation to the external world of historical reality. Here we see a visionary whose entire concern is historical, whose inward journey is wholly consumed by the question of Israel's collective fate. The consoling vision he receives is entirely within Jewish tradition: despite Israel's oppression in this world, the House of David lives on in heaven. Interestingly there is no specific mention of the Messiah here; it may be that David himself has taken on the messianic role, though that too remains unsaid. Many of the surrounding images of the vision, including the angels who weave garments for the righteous and the divine treasures of snow and hail, are well attested in the Midrashic collections of rabbinic lore. The claim that evil decrees are averted each day by the power of Israel's "Amen, May His great name be blessed" is also typically rabbinic in form.

The combination of terror and ecstatic joy that characterizes this description, and the possibility of radical and instantaneous shifts from one of these emotions to the other, are also widely to be found in this literature. Another source describes the path one must traverse as running between fields of fire and fields of ice; the voyager must step carefully lest he be either burned or frozen. New dangers may appear at each stage of the vision, and it is only the voyager's divine protector who saves him from utter destruction. As danger passes, a new level of beatific vision is opened up, though that too may turn instantly into a nightmare if proper vigilance is not maintained.

The tradition of heavenly voyage literature is a long one in Jewish sources. Flourishing from the early centuries of the common era down into the early Middle Ages, it was mostly supplanted by the speculative mysticism of the Kabbalah. Even among Kabbalists, however, we find some continuation of this activity; the *Zohar* itself contains a significant body of visionary journey materials. Most famous among latter-day tes-

taments to such experience is a letter written by the Ba'al Shem Tov in 1750, in which he describes an "ascent of the soul" that he had undertaken some three years earlier, during which he had held conversation with the Messiah and was given various secrets that he was sworn never fully to reveal.

### *The Lover of God*

The motif of divine love, or of love and passionate longing as constituting the relationship between God and the human soul, is widely attested in mystical literature throughout the world. With mysticism defined as a "longing to recover an original intimacy," it is only to be expected that the language of human love, our great attempt to do the same, would cross our path.

Here the biblical legacy is particularly important to later Judaism. The love of man and wife as a metaphoric expression of God's covenant with Israel is well known to the prophets. The longing of the individual's heart for the nearness of God is a frequent motif in the Psalms, whence it becomes a major factor in both Jewish and Christian pieties. It is the Song of Songs, however, presented in seemingly secular form in the Bible, that is to become the central bearer of the great love-mysticisms in both of these traditions. Rooted in the cultic eroticism of the ancient Near East, the Song as found in the Bible has outwardly been stripped of its sacred context, this being too tied up with paganism and the cults of fertility to be tolerated by the biblical editors. But the old sense of sacrality about the Song persisted, and it was not coincidental that Akiba, in the second century, proclaimed it the "holy of holies" among the books of Scriptures. Both Judaism and Christianity embraced the Song as allegory, the one reading into it the love between God and the Community of Israel, the other hearing in it of the love between Christ and the Church.

The collective and historical reading of the Song dominated the Jewish exegesis of the early centuries. In medieval times, however, philosophers and Kabbalists alike were to offer other readings, some finding in the Song echoes of the love between God and the human soul, while others read it as recounting a love that takes place entirely within God, a sacred marriage within the divine world at which man could be but a devoted attendant. The latter tended to dominate in the Kabbalistic sources, where religious eroticism was given a new lease on life, though in the context of a highly guarded system of personal morality.

Discussions of the love of God are to be found in all the major moral treatises of medieval Jewry, beginning with Bahya's *Duties of the Hearts* in the eleventh century. They typically distinguish a "lower" love of God, one motivated by earthly rewards, or even the promise of paradise, from

the "higher" or true love, one of pure and selfless devotion that knows no thought of reward. In later times these treatises were placed in a Kabbalistic context, and they were particularly important in the popular devotional literature that emerged from sixteenth-century Safed.

We have chosen to represent this aspect of Jewish mystical life with a poem by one of the leading figures of the Safed revival, Rabbi Eleazar Azikri (1533–1600). His well-known pietistic manual, *Sefer Hareḏim* (literally best translated as "Book of the Quakers," though of course without reference to the later Christian sect), was frequently reprinted and widely used. The poem, *Soul's Beloved*, is surely among the classics of mystical love poetry. The best testimony to its acceptance has been its frequent publication within the liturgy: the prayer books of most Near Eastern Jews offer it as a petition to be sung each morning, while the Hasidim of Eastern Europe assigned it to the Friday afternoon service, as an introduction to the Sabbath.

Soul's beloved, compassionate Father,  
 Draw Your servant to Your will.  
 Let him run, swift as a deer,  
 To kneel before Your majesty.  
 Sweeter is Your love to him  
 Than honey from the comb,  
 Than any taste of pleasure.

Glorious, radiant, cosmic light,  
 My soul is faint for love of You.  
 Heal her, I pray, O God,  
 Show to her Your splendrous glow.  
 Then will she be strengthened, cured,  
 Your maidservant forever.

O Faithful, may Your tender mercies  
 Reach Your son who loves You greatly.  
 In deepest longings has he sought  
 To gaze upon Your mighty splendor.  
 My God, my heart's delight,  
 Come quickly; be not hidden.

Reveal Yourself, my Dearest; spread over me  
 The shelter of Your peace,  
 Your presence lighting up the world,  
 We shall rejoice, exult in You.  
 Hurry, Lover, time has come,  
 Grant me Your grace  
 As You did of old.

The poem is not a Kabbalistic one in the specific sense; it does not refer to the *sefirot*, and the symbolic language of the Kabbalah is not to be

found in it. It speaks directly to God, whose name, YHWH, is to be found in the opening letter of each stanza in the Hebrew. The metaphors it uses are remarkably accessible, familiar to anyone who has but the slightest experience, from reading or from personal encounter, with the reality of religious love.

We should note that the author seems to vacillate between the two central metaphors of personal relationship between God and Israel: that of father and child and that of lover and beloved. In the first and third stanzas the fatherhood of God is mentioned, and the voice of the poet is in the masculine gender. In the second stanza, the author speaks of his soul, using the feminine of *nefesh* as a way to heighten the erotic imagery, and to move from the language of father and faithful son to that of distant lover and lovesick bride. The third stanza, though returning to the masculine, continues the motif of lovesick longing, to a point where the metaphors are thoroughly commingled. By the final stanza father and son are no longer to be found, and the poem reveals itself to be one of passionate; sacred eros. This process, in which the intensity of erotic love first masks itself in filial form, is an accurate reflection of the ambiguity with which the love theme is treated in Jewish sources. Seemingly mindful of the biblical revulsion toward sacral eroticism in the pagan context, the public liturgy as compiled by the rabbis makes virtually no use of the sensual imagery that was part of its legacy. In those places where talk of love is to be found in the early liturgy, it is always carefully identified as the love of father and child or perhaps that of ruler and devoted subject. In the work of the ancient poets, however, whose *piyyutim* served as a quasi-esoteric counterpoint to the prose liturgy, it is the God and Israel of the allegorical Song of Songs who frequently come to the fore. The sense that such language, though proper, is best guarded for use by "the modest" is long established.

*Soul's Beloved*, however, does not belong to this genre of *piyyut*. Though accepted for liturgical usage, the poem has nothing in it to indicate that its primary meaning was other than private. With the exception of a single line in the last stanza, the poem is composed entirely in the singular, and its subject is the longing of a single soul for God, not that of the Community of Israel. Azikri's poem stands very much in the Spanish tradition of Hebrew poetry, one in which the expression of individual feeling, in sacred as well as "secular" contexts, was given a new legitimacy. The lover of God portrayed here is a lone seeker, having neither the comfort nor the conflict of feeling himself situated in or responsible to a religious community. The sense of the religious as essentially belonging to the private life of the individual and his inner relationship with God reflects medieval Judaism at its most universal, at its point of greatest similarity to contemporary Christianity or Islam. Indeed there is nothing in the poem, if we did not know its authorship and origin, that would tell us for

certain that it was a Jewish and not a Christian or Sufi work.

Like its subject-matter, the poem's language is remarkably accessible to the Hebrew reader of its (or almost any) day. It draws richly on both biblical and liturgical turns of phrase, placing it in the context of those writings most familiar to its intended readers. Azikri's goal, from a literary as well as a religious point of view, is one of exquisite simplicity—a goal precisely in line with the religious life he describes in his *Sefer Haredim*.

### *The Symbol-Maker*

The essential creative effort of the Kabbalists was, as we have indicated, devoted to promulgation of a new symbolic language. The Kabbalists thoroughly gleaned the earlier sources of Judaism, especially the Bible and the legendary portions of Talmud and Midrash, gathering together fragments of symbolic speech about matters divine and fashioning them into a coherent and systematic whole. Also interesting to them as a source of symbols, however, was their observance of everyday life. The *realia* of their times were joined together with biblical phrases and Talmudic legends, creating a symbolic edifice of tremendous power.

Our attempt here is to look in the laboratory, as it were, of the symbol-maker at work. The passage we choose is from the *Zohar*, and is to be seen as an extended meditation on the flame of a candle. Here we see the author, probably composing the passage by candlelight, looking at the object before him and allowing it to be transformed in his symbolic imagination. Rabbi Simeon, the speaker in this passage, is Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai, the chief speaker and alleged author of the *Zohar*. In fact he probably represents Rabbi Moses De Leon, the thirteenth-century Spanish Kabbalist who actually wrote the work but who saw himself as standing in special relationship with the soul of Rabbi Simeon.

Rabbi Simeon began by citing two verses of Scripture: "The Lord your God is a consuming fire" (Deut. 4:24) and "You who cleave to the Lord your God are all alive today" (Deut. 4:4). This matter [how one can cleave to fire and live] has been discussed among the companions. Come and see: "the Lord your God is a consuming fire"; among the companions it is said that there is a fire that consumes fire. It consumes and destroys it, for one fire is stronger than the other. This has been established.

But come and see. He who wants to understand the mystery of the holy union should look at the flame as it rises from a coal or a lighted candle. No flame can rise unless it is attached to some coarse matter. Come and see. There are two lights in the rising flame: one is a shining white light, the other is either black or blue. The white light is higher,



rising straight upward; beneath it, forming its seat, is the blue or black light. The white light hovers over it, and they are joined together as one. The black or blue light serves as the other's throne of glory. This is the mystery of the blue [thread in the fringed garment].

The blue-black flame is joined to that thing beneath it, binding it together with the white light. Sometimes the blue or black light turns red, but the white light above it never changes; it is forever white. The lower light does change; sometimes blue, sometimes black, sometimes red. It holds fast to both ends, to the white light above and to the burning substance beneath, ever consuming what comes its way. Whatever is joined to it is destroyed and devoured, for its path is one of destruction.

All annihilation and all death depend on this, as it devours all that is placed beneath it. The white light above, however, neither consumes nor destroys, nor does it change its light. For this reason Moses said "the Lord *your* God is a consuming fire"—indeed consuming, devouring all that comes its way. But he said "your God" rather than "our God," because Moses himself was in that white light above, the one that does not destroy.

Come and see: the blue flame could not be aroused to burn, to join itself to the white light, without Israel, those who cleave to it from below. Even though the way of that blue-black light is to destroy everything beneath it, Israel cleave to it and live. Therefore "you who cleave to the Lord your God are all alive today." Again, "your" God, and not "our" God; this is the blue-black light that devours all. But you cleave to it and yet you continue to live; you are "all alive today."

Above the white light is yet another light, an invisible light that surrounds it. There is sublime mystery here, and you will find it all in the rising flame. . . .

The mysterious aura of the passage is typical of the *Zohar*, a work of poetic imagination that should be read more as evocative verse than as discursive prose. The author has here taken a simple object, the burning candle, and has transformed it into a symbol of the divine universe and of the mystery of Israel's survival. There is an unspoken but strong association with the biblical tale of the burning bush, read by the much earlier rabbis as a symbol of Israel's survival amid the fires of destruction.

Here the Kabbalist speaks of three rungs of divinity as he perceives them in the burning candle. The highest rung, the God beyond all knowing, is represented by the glow that surrounds the top of the candle, the diffusion of light that cannot be seen. This is the most hidden and sublime mystery, that toward which the straight white flame is ever reaching, the Nothingness with which it seeks to unite. That white flame represents the world of the *sefirot*, the combined symbol-clusters that together constitute the personhood of God. Here they are focused together as a single flame,

rising in collective purity toward that which is beyond.

The lower flame, out of which the white flame rises, is the *shekhinah*, the last of the ten *sefirot* and the symbolic presence of God in the lower world. She (the *shekhinah* symbols are mostly female) is at once black, for she has no light of her own, blue, for she is the holy color of sea and sky, and red, as judgment-fire is kindled through her and she stands as a judging, even punishing, monarch. The devouring and destroying female side of divinity is most surprising in the context of Judaism, though one who has studied the religions of India will surely find this side familiar.

It is through the *shekhinah*, God's manifest-presence, that Israel is bound to him. Only Moses, the one with whom God spoke "face to face," has risen above this level, and is attached directly to the white light above. The miracle of Israel's existence, here in a striking reinterpretation of the burning bush image, is that they relate to this element in God that in all other cases would destroy and consume—yet they go on living. It is the consuming and passionate fire of God, rather than the destructive forces of earthly woes, that Israel survives. "Even though the Lord is a consuming fire," says Moses to Israel, "you who cleave to it remain alive this day."

### *The Holy Man*

The figures of the *zaddiq* and the *hasid* (literally "righteous one" and "pious one") are well known throughout the religious literature of Judaism. Representing a somewhat different ideal than the normative rabbi or sage who stood as legal head of the community, these types embodied a living model of religious personality not wholly dependent on the traditions of learning that dominated the rabbinic role. Sometimes depicted as more extreme figures than the rather sober and responsible sage, *hasidim* could make demands of themselves that not all could follow but that few could fail to admire. *Hasid* and *zaddiq* fired the folk imagination of Jewry for many centuries. The Talmudic belief that no fewer than thirty-six (the figure is related to old astral speculations) righteous persons lived in each generation, and for their sake the world was sustained, was the basis of many a folktale in the medieval and later periods. Sometimes the figures claimed as members of these elect circles were anonymous holy men, no more than fleeting shadows in the sources of popular history. In other periods we have well-known historic personages, such as Judah the Hasid in medieval Germany or Isaac Luria in later Safed, serving as the bearers of this supranormative pietistic ideal.

It was only in Eastern European Hasidism, however, that the figure of the *zaddiq* became institutionalized. This Hasidism was a movement of popular piety that depended wholly upon the network of relationships

between masters and disciples. It formed a world in which the presumed power to know men's souls and to intercede in their prayers was passed on by secret transmission from father to son or from teacher to leading disciple, a world in which the ordinary Jew participated chiefly by basking in his master's radiance. This charismatic revivalism, as it may be called, had both strengths and weaknesses; the spiritual and moral character of the climate created varied greatly with the quality of the person in whose hands leadership was so fully entrusted. The fact that Hasidism was, in its early days, a movement of great creativity and religious profundity stemmed almost wholly from the quality of those rabbis and preachers who were its first bearers.

Noteworthy amid this early group is the name of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav (1772-1810), the great-grandson of the Ba'al Shem Tov and founder of the small but highly devoted sect of Bratslav Hasidim. A depressive person by nature, Nahman taught that true rejoicing in God, the goal of all religious life, could come only at the end of the most severe struggle. This message, combined with the unswerving loyalty he demanded of his disciples, meant that he was to lead but a small community of elite followers, unlike most of his contemporaries. Nahman was, however, blessed with unusual powers of expression, and many ideas recorded only clumsily in other Hasidic writings are presented with special grace and form in the Bratslav sources. The following are two passages from Nahman's collected teaching on the *zaddiq* and his disciples.

Know that there is a field, and in that field grow the most beautiful trees and grasses. The great beauty and grandeur of this field cannot be described; happy is the eye that has seen it.

These trees and grasses are holy souls that are growing there. And there are also a certain number of naked souls which wander about outside the field, waiting and longing for redemption, so that they can return to their place. Sometimes even a great soul, upon whom other souls depend, wanders outside the field and has great difficulty in returning. All of them are longing for the master of the field, who can concern himself with their redemption. Some souls require someone's death in order that they be redeemed, while others can be helped by acts of worship.

And he who wants to gird his loins, to enter the field as its master, has to be a very strong; brave, and wise man; a very great *zaddiq*. One has to be a person of the highest type in order to do this; sometimes the task can only be completed by one's own death. Even this [offering of one's life] requires a very great person; there are some great ones whose deaths would not even be sufficient. Only the very greatest of men could possibly accomplish the task within his own lifetime. How much suffering and hardship pass over him! But through his own greatness he transcends it all, tending to the field and its needs. When

he does succeed in bringing those souls in from the outside, it is good to pray, for then prayer too is in its proper place.

This master of the field takes care of all the trees, watering them and seeing that they grow, and doing whatever else needs to be done in that field. He also must keep the trees far enough apart from one another so that one does not crowd the other out. Sometimes you have to show great distance to one who has become too close, so that one does not deny the other. And know that these souls bear fruit when they do the will of heaven. Then the eyes of the master light up, so that he can see where he needs to see. This is the meaning of "the field of seers" (Num. 23:14). But when they do not do the will of heaven, God forbid, his eyes grow dark, and this is the meaning of "the field of tears," for it is weeping that ruins one's vision. . . .

The second passage takes the form of a comment on the prophet Elisha's final request as his master Elijah is about to be taken into the heavens.

*May your spirit be twofold upon me* (2 Kings 2:9). . . . Know that it is possible for a disciple to be greater than his master, even twice as great. Nevertheless, it all comes about through his master's powers. This is why Elisha said "your spirit": it was by Elijah's own spirit that Elisha was given the double measure.

It is taught that the *zaddiq* has two spirits, one above and one below. Thus Scripture says: "These are the generations of Noah, Noah . . ." (Gen. 5:9): Noah above and Noah below; he had life above and below. The life and spirit that remain above are indeed very great.

Disciples and *zaddiq* are of the same root, except that they depend upon him as do the branches upon the trunk: The tree trunk receives its nourishment from the root, and the branches are sustained through the trunk. There are various qualities to all this: some disciples are like branches, others like leaves, and so forth. . . .

There are various kinds of disciples. But he who is really bound to the *zaddiq*, as a branch is bound to the tree, will feel all the rises and falls the *zaddiq* undergoes, even when he is not with the *zaddiq*. It is proper for a disciple to feel within himself all the fluctuations of the *zaddiq*, since he is bound to him as the branch is to the tree. For the branches feel all the upward and downward motions that take place within the tree. That is how they come to life and grow in the summer: the tree draws its sustenance from the root, and, through certain inner channels, causes the life-force to flow upward from it. In winter, when the tree's moisture dries up and these channels are narrowed, the branches also shrink, and shed their leaves. And he [the true disciple] is bound to the *zaddiq* in this way, feeling all the inner ups and downs of the *zaddiq*. . . .

It is not difficult to see from these passages why Hasidism was, and in fact remains, so controversial a movement in the history of Judaism. The

degree of power the *zaddiq* is given over his disciples, particularly the sense that their relationship to the root is only through him, can be frightening to many. Such authority has indeed been misused frequently in the history of religion. On the other hand, these passages also show the tremendous sense of both awe and love with which the role of *zaddiq* is undertaken by one who treats it seriously. He must have no regard for his own life, realizing that he is but a channel through which others are to be sustained. Realizing that even by his death he may not succeed in accomplishing the great restoration of souls that is his dream, he undauntedly remains faithful to his task, as the gardener would not abandon his young plants or, perhaps more appropriately, as a loving father would not leave his children. The warm and affectionate parental metaphor through which Hasidism most often saw God as relating to his beloved children provided the model by which the master could similarly cherish and sustain his disciples.

Using a phrase they had inherited from the *Zohar*, the Hasidic sources describe the *zaddiq* as one who "holds fast to heaven and earth." Never turning aside from the mystic vision of union with the divine presence, the *zaddiq* was simultaneously to open himself to the demands and spiritual needs of ordinary Jews, however small-minded and profane these might seem to him. In joining together these two worlds in his own self, he was to serve as a channel, both for the flow of God's blessings upon his people and for the bringing of Israel's cry before the Throne of Glory. At his best, the *zaddiq* embodied a religious ideal that was heir to both the prophetic and mystical traditions, the religious, charismatic made once again; like the prophets of old, a figure who could provide direction and meaning for the lives of those who would open themselves to his vision.

Though our four types do not exhaust the variety of mystical figures to be found within Judaism, they should suffice for the point we are seeking to understand: the range of mystical teachings and writings within a single tradition can be extremely broad, and the simple designation "Jewish mystic" (or Christian or Buddhist mystic) tells us rather little, from the phenomenological point of view, of what the inner life or devotional message of a particular figure may contain. The division of spiritual teachers according to the traditions that nurtured them will of course be helpful in certain ways: naturally the symbols and theological formulas employed by mystics who were taught the sources of classical Judaism will have much in common. But as the history of religions has shown us to look beyond the limits of individual traditions in other areas, so must we be willing to see the wide variety of mystical teachings present in a single tradition as testimony to the human search for a unitive truth that reaches beyond the divisions of our tribal and cultural boundaries.

What is it, then, that an encounter with Judaism may teach us about the mystical endeavor? The first lesson is that of variety itself. We have

seen, within the confines of what is after-all the smallest of the major human religious communities, and one deeply bound to tradition and Scripture, widely divergent types, each of whom has a distinctive approach to the cultivation of inwardness that characterizes all mystics. We further learn that the language of mysticism does not necessarily have to be unitive; the mystic does not have to proclaim, even at the end of the path, "I am God" or "There is nothing but the One." Such formulations as the latter do occur occasionally in Jewish mystical sources, especially in Hasidism, but even there they are very much the exception.\* More generally, mystics learn to express themselves within the established limits of those traditions that have nurtured them. Thus the author of the *Zohar*, for example, would himself have considered it entirely improper to speak of a human being rising to unite with the holy Nothingness; to make such a claim in the first person would have been laughable in his eyes. But as he speaks of the coarse matter of the candle feeding the blue flame, the blue flame nurturing the white, and the white flame reaching beyond into the invisible, we may understand that symbolism has provided him a way of understanding the passage of the corporeal into transcendence, without (even mentally) having to tread on theologically dangerous ground.

In our *Merkavah* passage we see another way in which the mystic's inward transformation may be recounted without so much as touching on the question of divine transcendence. Here the vision is one of David and the House of Israel, bestowed by angels who protect the voyager from harm and sustain him amid his fears. But God himself is never even mentioned! Only the Creator's throne slips into this account; the reader presumes that God is seated upon or is above that throne, but our heavenly voyager is content (this is not true of all *Merkavah* texts) to describe the surrounding glories of the heavenly chamber. When he says "Happy is the eye that has seen it," he still refers to the heavenly choirs and the procession of the kings of Israel, making no claim at having seen the king himself.

Such examples should lead us to speculate on the more general question of how it is that mysticism, taking one form or another, will make its appearance in every one of the world's great religious traditions. Judaism would indeed seem, on the face of things, to be somewhat difficult soil in which to root the mystical plant. The transcendent personhood of God being so firmly established, the distinction between God and the human realm so clear (no demigods, no apotheosis), and the commitment to this-worldly activism so total, Jewish mysticism comes as something of a surprise, most of all to those who have a fixed idea of what Judaism is or should be.

\* I have treated the appearance of such formulations in Hasidism in a special essay, appearing in *The Other Side of God*, edited by Peter Berger and published by Anchor Books in 1981.

Two major ways have been offered to account for the universality of mysticism in the world's religions. One is collectivist/historical in approach, the other more individual and psychological. Both surely contain elements of truth, and it is probably false (as the Jungians would remind us) to see them as fully separate explanations. The historical view claims that religion goes through a series of developmental stages, and that these involve an increasing abstraction of the deity and positing of distance between human beings and access to religious experience. In its earliest animistic stages, so the account goes, religion provides man with endless access to divinity, in sacred land, trees, sky, and all the rest. As civilization progresses, the deity becomes accessible only in *certain* rocks or trees, in holy sites, and then only in cult objects or in established shrines. As pagan religion gives way to monotheism, the image of the deity becomes more complex and abstract, until philosophical religion finally declares him faceless; possessed of no attributes, and beyond all description. Such a God, however, is not one that ordinary humans can live with, so a counterforce of resurgent myth, in its later stages taking the form of a mystical mythology, goes on as counterpoint to the process of increasing abstraction. In the writings of Gershom Scholem, who is associated with this historical-dialectical approach to the understanding of mysticism, Kabbalah has been described as an example of such a counterforce, emerging in the centuries following the great triumph of medieval Jewish rationalism.

The parallel to this process in the psychological life of the individual will not be hard to trace for anyone with but a smattering of Freud. The infant, surrounded by warmth and secure affection, grows into an increased sense of isolation and abandonment. In religion he seeks a restoration of that primal harmony from which he feels cut off, and it is particularly the testimony of the mystics, with both their openness to feminine/maternal language and their willingness to speak in abstract "oceanic" terms, that the Freudian in this sense would find interesting.

Another aspect of the psychological dimension of explaining mysticism, as yet in its infancy, has to do with the chemistry of consciousness and the place of chemical reaction within the brain in stimulating states of consciousness that seem beyond the ordinary and call forth esoteric and symbolic uses of language in order to approach their seeming "ineffability." Research into this area has of course been stimulated by the claims (dating back to Aldous Huxley's *Doors of Perception*) that states seemingly very similar to those described by the mystics could be induced by the administration of certain "hallucinogenic" drugs. While this avenue of explanation surely needs further study, one must be especially wary here of the dangers of reductionism. Chemistry of the brain may indeed have to do with altered states of mind, as the testimony of yogic practice would also seem to confirm, but the content of no particular

mystical text or experience will ever be accounted for by pharmacological explanation alone. Of course reductionism is a danger when it comes to any attempt to explain religious phenomena.

In the course of looking at our examples, we should also have learned something more generally applicable about how to read the literature of mysticism. The Kabbalists provide an extreme example of mystics who hesitate to speak directly of mystical experience. This reticence is not primarily brought about, as some would suppose, by fear of persecution were they to speak more openly. It was considered simply improper, showing poor taste and sinful pride, to offer accounts of one's own experiences. (This of course was not yet true for the *Merkayah* period, when first-person narrative was used, albeit through the cloak of pseudepigrapha.) The reader of such sources necessarily must also become a translator, seeking to cull from exegesis of a biblical tale or from some fine point in the interrelationships between the *sefirot* what it is the mystic is saying about his own inner state. Kabbalistic literature in general should be viewed in large part as a projecting of states of soul and stages of consciousness upon the universe, a description of inner states in terms of "upper" worlds. It is the reader's job cautiously to reverse the mirrors, as it were, so that the description of those numerous worlds above, often seemingly so utterly beyond meaning, will allow him to gain some insight into the mystic's own soul as well.

The best example of this need may be seen in a matter that constantly seems to preoccupy writers in the Kabbalistic tradition: that of *rungs* and *levels*. The assertion that a particular moment in the biblical narrative, or a certain word in the daily liturgy, represents such-and-such a level, rung *X* in world *Y*, for example, is the very bread and butter of Kabbalistic commentary. Especially the later Kabbalah, that of both Luria and Cordovero, may be read as a constant mapping, remapping, and refinement of the maps of this upper universe. What is the meaning of all these rungs and levels? Surely some of it seems to be nothing more than the Kabbalistic mind having run away with itself, a casuistry of myth not much different from the *pilpul* of legal dialectics as played out by the latter-day Talmudists. But it also may be seen to depict a true and constant need in the Kabbalist's search, a need for definition and moorings in an otherwise compassless sea of contemplation. Though described in terms of mythical cosmology, the repeated statement of rung after rung allows the Kabbalist to know where he has gotten, and also, an ever-important consideration for the inward traveler, what stages he will have to traverse on the return voyage.

Such an approach to the sources is at times difficult to defend; there is no positive scientific test that allows us to know at what point we have ceased looking into the mystic's soul and have begun projecting our own.



Without taking such a risk, however, it will hardly be worth our while to study the mystics. Indeed an appreciation of their writings requires that we develop the critical postures of both historian and psychologist. But the masters of the Mishnah were right when they said that "the matter of the *Merkavah* is not to be taught even to an individual, unless he is both wise and has some understanding of these matters on his own."

### Sources

The originals of the four passages translated are to be found respectively in *Merkavah Shelemah* 3b-4a; Sephardic Prayer Book, compared with MS Adler 74 at the Jewish Theological Seminary; *Zohar* I 50b-51a; *Liqqutey MoHaRaN* 65:1, 66:1. Translations are all original, though that of *Yedid Nefesh* is indebted to the prose version of T. Karmi in the recent *Penguin Book of Hebrew Verse*.

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# **Take Judaism, for Example**

Studies toward the  
Comparison of Religions

Edited by  
**Jacob Neusner**

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