

REVIEW ARTICLE

KABBALISTIC RE-VISION: A REVIEW ARTICLE OF ELLIOT WOLFSON'S *Through a Speculum That Shines*

Through a Speculum That Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism. By ELLIOT WOLFSON. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994. Pp. x+452. \$49.50 (cloth).

Scholars of Jewish mysticism, ever conscious that they labor still in the shadow of the great Gershom Scholem (1897–1982), virtual founder of the discipline, are used to thinking of their field as centered in Jerusalem among Scholem's students, successors, and critics. More than in any area of Judaic studies, research in Jewish mysticism in North America has played a rather secondary role. Elliot Wolfson's magnificent *Through a Speculum That Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism*, followed in short order by two volumes of collected shorter studies, goes a long way toward changing that situation.¹ Wolfson is clearly in the first rank of Kabbalah scholars, the first American since the late Alexander Altmann to achieve that status. His *Through a Speculum That Shines* has received both the National Jewish Book Award and the Award of Excellence of the American Academy of Religion—honors richly deserved by this major work of scholarship.

Through a Speculum That Shines is essentially a study of the place and various understandings of visual religious experience in Judaism from the beginning of the Common Era through the High Middle Ages. Its scope includes both accounts of vision by Jews in the rabbinic and medieval periods and explanations by thinkers in those eras of visions recounted in the biblical text itself. While highly sophisticated in his use of typologies and various other phenomenological tools, Wolfson, like Moshe Idel and most scholars in this field (following a

¹ Elliot Wolfson, *Along the Path: Studies in Kabbalistic Myth, Symbolism, and Hermeneutics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), and *Circle in the Square: Studies in the Use of Gender in Kabbalistic Symbolism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995).

model set by Scholem himself), combines the historical and phenomenological approaches, giving us a treatment that progresses chronologically through the sources, but always with an eye to typologies of mystical experience, to the relationship of mind and eye in the envisaging of that which is beyond sight, and to the complex interplay of experience and hermeneutics. There is also a special concern with gender questions and with psychosexual readings of the sources, nourished primarily by the very strong influence of French critic Luce Irigaray.

First, it must be said that this is a tremendously ambitious undertaking, and one that is accomplished with remarkable success, including lucidity and grace of style. Wolfson transcends the barriers between rabbinics, *merkavah*, poetry, philosophy, and Kabbalah to give us a richly panoramic view of visionary experience throughout classical Judaism. He draws on a number of his own prior studies to show these links, cutting his way deftly through a thicket of extraordinarily difficult and often obscure geonic and early medieval sources, many of which are preserved only in manuscript. For its erudition and the treasures of its footnotes alone, this is a major work and one that will long be seen as a basis for further scholarship.

Visionary experience is a problem already in the Hebrew Scriptures that form the basis of all later versions of Judaism. There is a strong tendency in Scripture toward a fully aniconic understanding of God (Deuteronomy 4–6 is the *locus classicus* of this view) while other passages (Exodus 24, Isaiah 6, Ezekiel 1) speak in boldly visual and anthropomorphic terms.² The unresolved tension between these views brings about an extraordinarily rich discussion in the later sources, revolving around the question of whether visions are actual depictions of God as He manifests Himself, creations of the human imagination, or (the usual medieval solution) some subtle combination of the two. Wolfson has mastered and clarified all of this complicated material, showing the reader how for Jewish tradition “the imagination is the faculty that allows the formless essence of the hidden God to be manifest as a visible presence in the heart of the pious soul” (p. 324).

Part of this focus on the imagination is created by an interesting (and perhaps not incidental) feature of the Hebrew language. The word stem DMH, meaning “to be like,” is used in its second conjugation as “to imagine.” Thus the noun *dimayon* can mean both “similarity” and “imagination.” The prophet “likens” God to man, “images” God (i.e., attributes form to the formless God), and “imagines” Him all by the same word. This coincidence of meanings makes both for interesting wordplays and genuine confusion in the interpretation of such key passages as Gen. 1:26 (“Let us make a human in our image, after our likeness”), Isa. 40:18 (“To whom will you liken God, and what image will you attribute to Him?”), and Hos. 12:11 (“By the hand of the prophet I am imaged”). The words *demut*, *tedammeyun*, and *adammeḥ* of these verses all call forth association with the imaginative faculty.

The complex interplay of docetic (God as revealed in the prophet’s imagination) and veridical (images of God having an existence outside the mind) concep-

² A third position, namely, that there is an image to be seen, but such seeing will cost the visionary his life, is given brief consideration (p. 27), but full discussion of it is postponed until Wolfson reaches the Zohar (p. 335).

tions of vision is a major theme of Wolfson's *Through a Speculum That Shines*. So too is the interpenetration of occult vision and rationalism in the thought of poet/philosopher Judah Halevi and German-Jewish pietist Eleazar of Worms. The esoteric writings of the latter and indeed of the whole pietistic circle of Ashkenaz are given much attention in this work, as in Wolfson's oeuvre generally. The careful reading of the Ashkenazic sources, most still in manuscript, has been one of his major contributions to the field. Wolfson's study follows up on Scholem's later work³ in continuing to trace the influence of Ashkenazic esotericism on the earliest development of what may be properly considered Kabbalah, emerging in Provence and Catalonia in the late twelfth century.

But it is Wolfson's understanding of Kabbalah itself that is of greatest interest here; the entire book works its way toward, and in many ways is shaped by, the two final and most important chapters, those dealing with early Kabbalah and the late thirteenth-century Zohar, the most important Kabbalistic work. Wolfson shows how Kabbalah, and particularly the Zohar, is heir to the entire earlier tradition, integrating Midrashic, *merkavah*, and philosophical elements into the developing Kabbalistic worldview.

The most important creation of the Kabbalists lies in the realm of mystical symbolism and the daring reincorporation of myth into Judaism. When looking at the Zohar, one can easily gain the impression that it is more the mythic than the mystical that lies at the heart of the enterprise. The essential myth of a Godhead rent asunder and in search of reunion is told through a vast array of symbols. The structure of Kabbalah's symbolism is a tenfold grid of associative clusters: each of the ten *sefirot*, ostensibly "aspects" of the divine self or stages in the flow of God's self-revealing emanation, is in function a group of terms and verbal pictures, each member of the cluster identified with all the others. While talking about the same *sefirah* or pair of *sefirot* in union, the author will with utmost grace let his symbolic imagination flow from water imagery to that of light, from sexual metaphors to those of one or another of the commandments, and then on to beasts and birds or Jerusalem and the history of the Jews. Within a given cluster all the symbols, whether drawn from nature or from tradition, are supposed to bear the same valence. Thus is created a symbolically enriched language, a linguistic entity given a new profundity by this network of associations across the bounds of nature, Torah text, and Jewish religious tradition. The more mythic works of the Kabbalah, including the Bahir and the Zohar literature, richly describe the inner life of the Godhead through the interplay of these ten multiplicities of symbols. Since for the Kabbalist, as Wolfson notes so aptly, hermeneutics and experience are fully united, we may say that to speak sefirotic language is itself to enter the world of the *sefirot* and to live on that intensified plane of being. It is in this way that the mythic and the mystical become one.

³ Especially Gershom Scholem's *Origins of the Kabbalah* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society; Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987). This is a posthumously published update of Scholem's *Ursprung und Anfaenge der Kabbala*, ed. R. J. Z. Werblowsky (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1962). Scholem had offered two earlier versions of Kabbalah's origins, one published as *Reshit ha-Qabbalah* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1948) and the other a transcript of his lectures on the subject, *Reshit ha-Qabbalah we-Sefer ha-Bahir*, ed. Rivka Schatz (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1962).

For example, note the ninth *sefirah* that is much the subject of my discussion below. This locus within the divine realm is designated by such symbols as Righteous One, Foundation of the Cosmos, Phallus (of the *sefirot* in andropic form), Covenant, Bow, Spring (of water), Deer, All, Joseph, Sabbath Day, Artisan, End, Statute, Noah, and many more. Like many of the Kabbalistic symbolic configurations, this symbol-cluster is loaded with a deep inner tension. It is the phallus of God when depicted in manlike form. As such, it symbolizes maleness, potency, seed, the life force, the flow of divine energy into the world. But it is also designated as *ṣaddiq*, the Righteous One, precisely insofar as righteousness means control of the sexual passions, “guarding the covenant,” and chastity in general. Joseph is the biblical incarnation of the ninth *sefirah* precisely because he resisted the wiles of Potiphar’s wife. The Kabbalist, himself seeking to fulfill the human ideal of *ṣaddiq*, identifies most directly with this aspect of the Godhead. Behaviorally, he emulates this aspect of divinity by extremes of chastity, going quite beyond that required by Jewish law. But in his imaginative life he experiences the deep inner complexity of being God’s righteous disciple as well as His powerful (and phallic) embodiment in the lower world; innocence and eros must be joined in him.

Another key figure in Kabbalistic symbolism is the crown of God; both the first (“highest”) and tenth (“lowest”) *sefirot* are designated as crowns, the former by the term *keter* and the latter as *‘atarah*. The ultimate goal of Kabbalistic mysticism, as I hope to demonstrate elsewhere,⁴ is the reunion of these two crowns, an event in which *shekhinah*, the tenth *sefirah* and divine consort, but also including the historical people Israel and the mystic’s own soul,⁵ is reabsorbed into the oneness of the reconstituted single crown. To effect this union, *shekhinah* undertakes a long journey through the symbolic realms. Her primary goal is the arousal of her cosmic spouse, the blessed Holy One or the God of rabbinic Judaism, identified either with *tif’eret*, the sixth *sefirah*, or with the six intermediate *sefirot* (fourth through ninth) in toto. That masculine God figure, to whom she was once joined as a Siamese twin (they had to be separated in the course of the creation process), now faces her from above and is thus closest to her in his lower appendage, “covenant” or the circumcised phallus of the male deity. Since the word *‘atarah* can refer to the corona of the penis as well as to a crown upon the head, Kabbalists made the daring claim that the first step in *shekhinah*’s ascent was her attachment to this ninth *sefirah* as its corona. This union, that which Wolfson describes as the androgynous phallus, is the first step toward the reunion of *shekhinah* with *tif’eret*. This reconstituted androgynous divine self, absorbing also the various *sefirot* of left and right, then continues the journey upward to union with the higher crown. This is the central myth of medieval Kabbalah.

⁴ In my forthcoming *Keter: The Crown of God in Early Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, in press).

⁵ The convergence of the female deity, the Jewish people, and the soul of the mystic in this symbol is clearest in the *Sefer ha-Bahir*, the earliest Kabbalistic text and one whose origins are still quite obscure. (The *Bahir* exists in a partially reliable though unscientific English translation by Aryeh Kaplan [New York: Samuel Weiser, 1979]). Later Kabbalistic sources, in their desire to fix firm the boundary between God and the lower worlds, tend to obscure this original association.

Wolfson has significantly advanced the study of Jewish mysticism by focusing sharply on the first stage of this process. He has shown rightly that the Kabbalah, written by and for men, sees sexuality from an androcentric perspective. The identification with and veneration of the ninth *sefirah* contains, and not only by implication, a fascination with the image of divine phallus well known to students of Kabbalah, and Wolfson is right to draw our attention to it.⁶ The Kabbalist, Righteous One/Phallus/Foundation of the lower world is a special devotee of this *sefirah* within the upper world; his religious life, including especially the act of study and interpretation, is daringly depicted by Wolfson in erotic terms, a union with the (female?) text through which the student/interpreter is also showered with the blessing of divine seed. Even in union with his own wife (who presumably often knew little of his Kabbalistic intentions) the mystic sought to make himself more whole by including the female side within his own self, as she would fulfill herself through attachment, depicted here in the most graphically genital terms, to him. The perfect human representation of the divine image is thus essentially an “androgynous male.”⁷ To this point I am mostly in accord with Wolfson’s reading of the sources.

But Wolfson sees more here than this. The revelation of the *‘atarah* as the corona of the divine male means that the divine as female is in fact transparent. *Shekhinah*, the feminine hypostasis within divinity that is the best known and most widely influential creation of the Kabbalists, serves as an instrument of gazing but also as a kind of smokescreen to cover the real object of their desire. The feminine gateway to the sefrotic world is revealed to be nothing more than a vaginal optic hole through which the Kabbalist gazes at the cosmic phallus.⁸ In a complicated construction perhaps apparent only to readers of Irigaray, both the act of gazing (penetration by the optic phallus of the Kabbalist) and the object of the gaze are phallic. The female, whether an adorned bride of the Sabbath hymns or text of the Torah, is the speculum (meaning both “mirror” and gynecological

⁶ Scholem’s essay, “Tsaddik: The Righteous One,” in his *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead* (New York: Schocken, 1991), is overly tame in dealing with this subject. More interesting are the various writings of Jerusalem scholar Yehuda Liebes, especially his “The Messiah of the Zohar: On R. Simeon bar Yohai as a Messianic Figure,” and “Zohar and Eros.” The former is published in English in his collected *Studies in the Zohar* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), though the Hebrew original (in S. Re’em, ed., *The Messianic Idea in Jewish Thought: A Study Conference in Honour of the Eightieth Birthday of Gershom Scholem* [Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1982]) is significantly richer in detail. “Zohar and Eros” appeared (in Hebrew) in *Alpayyim* 9 (1994): 67–119. It is somewhat surprising that Wolfson does not make reference either to Dionysiac phallus worship in ancient Greece or to lingam worship in Indian religion, since these would be obvious parallels to, and perhaps even suggested remote sources for, the phallocentrism he sees in Kabbalah.

⁷ The depiction of the “androgynous male,” having absorbed the female, as the ideal, contrasts with the equally prevalent picture in Kabbalah of a reunited male-female partnership, as *shekhinah* rises to the level of *tif’eret*. This pair of readings interestingly conforms to the Torah’s own two versions of the creation of woman in Gen. 1:27 and 2:20–23, the former seeing her as an independent creation of God and the latter depicting her as created from Adam. My thanks to Michael Fishbane for this insight. Wolfson discusses this issue in his *Circle in the Square*, pp. 80, 92–98, etc.

⁸ On p. 306 Wolfson makes the move from *shekhinah* as locus of vision to *shekhinah* as instrument of vision to *shekhinah* as optic hole through which the vision is seen.

instrument) through which the Kabbalist contemplates God's (and his own) male organ. Wolfson believes that "the concealed phallus [is] the ultimate and obsessional object of the mystic's gaze" (p. 274). He finds in Jewish myth in general and the Zohar in particular a world of religious/literary fantasy dominated by obsessive fascination with the phallus and a hidden homoerotic passion and/or narcissistic preoccupation with the male organ.

None of this is entirely wrong, but Wolfson goes too far in drawing what becomes a one-sided picture, and for a number of reasons. The free-flowing quality of Kabbalistic symbolism has become overdetermined in his reading. His use of Irigaray has about it the quality of a new Freudian orthodoxy, where all other symbols are revealed as reducible to their "true" genital meanings. Not all references to the ninth symbol-cluster are necessarily phallic, but Wolfson unfailingly renders them as such, reminding the reader repeatedly that what we are talking about here is "the divine phallus."⁹

More significant, this reading of the Kabbalah sets aside the truly important role occupied by the female, especially in the Zoharic sources. *Shekhinah* is queen of the lower worlds, surrounded by myriads of angelic maidens, offering sustenance to all. The verbal pictures of her, frequent in the literature, are among the very richest products of the Kabbalist's imagination.¹⁰ She is the hind of dawn, mother of all the beasts of the forest who both governs and nourishes the entire universe. As female she is the city, temple, and holy of holies that the righteous/priest enters. This union brings about the birth of souls and the overflow

⁹ On p. 316 he discusses an 'Iyyun passage devoid of sexual imagery that attributes imagination to the ninth *sefirah*. Wolfson promptly reminds the reader that this is "the divine phallus" and has us on our way to "the phallic imagination." For other examples of gratuitous underscoring of the phallic association with the ninth *sefirah*, see pp. 245, 359, and 363, n. 126, etc. There are a few places in this very long and text-filled book where Wolfson's readings are supported by questionable translations. (These may be the result of wishful thinking, since Wolfson's Hebrew is generally superb.) Thus the passage by Jacob bar Sheshet on p. 360 does not say, "Permission has not been granted to write [about this]," leading one to join in the presumption of self-censorship of a dangerously erotic reference. The passage rather refers to the Oral Torah, which "was not given to be written." On p. 362 he quotes Todros Abulafia, commenting on the crowns of light to be given to the righteous in the future. On that day, Wolfson translates, "one does not have need for eating and drinking, for this [i.e., receiving the light] is actual eating." But '*akhilah wadda'it* has a different sense, that of the "true" eating, something higher or better than "actual eating." Thus Wolfson's conclusion from the passage, "eating . . . obviously to be understood as a symbol for integrative union," is highly questionable, since all of this is tied back to his claim that "the kabbalists are crowned in the light of the corona of the penis" (p. 360). It thus seems important to say that here there is no eating; the Kabbalist neither consumes nor is consumed by the divine phallus, but merely basks in the divine light. There is in fact no "eating" here, but direct sustenance of the righteous by divine light. Even in a passage dealing with the key symbol of the book (p. 274), I am not sure that Wolfson is correct in capitalizing the "H" of "His" in the sentence: "The tenth *sefirah* is the speculum that does not shine, and it is like a glass mirror, and the one who looks at it sees *His* [my emphasis] image within it." But that letter makes all the difference: What is it that the prophet is seeing through that unlit glass—God or his own self?

¹⁰ For a sampling of these in English translation, as well as a good general introduction to the place of *shekhinah* in the Zohar, the reader may want to consult Isaiah Tishby's *Wisdom of the Zohar* (Oxford: Littman Library, 1991), vol. 1.

of divine radiance below; the world's very existence depends upon it. As *mal-khut* ("realm") she governs and judges all the lower worlds. The Zohar is at least as filled with celebration of the female as it is with the male. The array of symbols associated with *shekhinah* is by far the most varied and complex of any of the ten. Wolfson's dismissal of this entire world of symbols through his single insight concerning 'atarah, one of a great many symbol-terms in this richest of all associative clusters, produces a significantly distorted picture of Kabbalistic eros.¹¹

From the psychological point of view as well, I believe that Wolfson's reading undercuts the function of *shekhinah* in the Kabbalistic imagination. In the earlier rabbinic literature *shekhinah* is simply a term that designates the presence of God. Though the noun is in feminine form, there is no female element in the myriad rabbinic depictions of *shekhinah*. The female element enters only shortly before the emergence of Kabbalah, as Midrash gives way to mysticism.¹² I would suggest that this happens precisely because of the growing intimacy of religious language, perhaps combined with an increased gender self-consciousness in the Middle Ages. The male mystic now has a certain discomfort with passionate longing for a male God. As the national allegorical understanding of the Song of Songs is replaced by a more intimate and personal reading (in both Jewish and Christian interpretations of the twelfth century), the female-gendered soul of the male Jew does not suffice as the recipient of divine eros. A female *shekhinah* is interposed between God and Israel so that both of them can be her lovers, free to be fully passionate without any fear of homoerotic stirrings. Wolfson and I agree that this shared feminine "partner" allows for the simultaneous and sympathetic sexual arousal of the male God and His aroused worshiper.¹³ But his perception of *shekhinah* as transparent, ever pointed toward its manifestation as the tip of "the divine phallus," would indicate either a failure of this move or a suggestion that from the start it was an apologetic device to hide Kabbalistic homoeroticism. I see no warrant for either of these readings.

The higher *sefirot* are also not given their due in Wolfson's treatment. Particularly lacking is consideration of *tif'eret*, the male God figure associated with the blessed Holy One of rabbinic tradition and the erstwhile twin and current suitor of *shekhinah*. By focusing on the union between the ninth and tenth *sefirot*, Wolfson gets an exaggeratedly genital picture of the male/female union of the *sefirot*. Had he selected the *tif'eret* rather than the *yesod* passages in the Zohar, he would have seen more of a face-to-face or "person-to-person" union than one so entirely focused on genitality. It is furthermore clear that Kabbalists throughout history gave primacy to the union of the sixth and tenth, rather than the ninth

¹¹ A key statement of Wolfson's view is to be found on pp. 274–75, n. 14. While he claims to be quite aware (as of course he is) of the rich literature of *shekhinah* depictions in the Zohar, these are all dismissible because they represent her only in her exilic state. "Even the image of the *Shekhinah* as a bride adorned for her wedding is a transition between exile and redemption. The latter is fully represented when the bride enters the nuptial chamber and is transformed therein . . . for the bride has become the corona of the penis."

¹² The key study here is Scholem's "*Shekhinah*: The Feminine Element in Divinity," in his *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead*.

¹³ See, e.g., the Zohar passages quoted on p. 372, n. 155.

and tenth, *sefirot*.¹⁴ The reader of Wolfson who is aware of the abundance of these other materials¹⁵ cannot escape the uncomfortable conclusion that his focus is distorted, perhaps overly shaped by his early studies of circumcision in the Kabbalah, or else driven by the particular Irigarayan interpretive framework he has decided to impose.

If these reservations about the Wolfson thesis are serious with regard to his Zohar readings, they are considerably stronger when applied to his attempts at reading earlier texts, including both midrashic and *merkavah* passages, from the same phallogocentric perspective. The list of such passages begins with his interpretation of the sin of Aaron's sons who "feasted their eyes upon the Presence" and the shining of Moses' face after the vision on the mount as a displaced reference to "the disclosure of the male organ, perhaps in an ejaculatory state" (pp. 42–43). Wolfson provides no convincing basis for such a reading. His assumption (p. 85, n. 50) that the term *yofi* (beauty) when applied to God in a midrashic source refers to "the nakedness of the genitals when exposed during a sexual act" is similarly without sufficient support.¹⁶ The same goes for his reading of sources from the obscure 'Iyyun circle of mystics (pp. 281 ff.), where he applies the notion of phallic gaze not to the lowest of the *sefirot* but to the emergence of *keter* and *hokhmah*, the most primordial and recondite of the divine powers. He does not tell the reader that there is no tradition within Kabbalah that applies genital symbolism here; it is Wolfson himself, apparently, who has decided that the primordial ether broken through (as definition first begins to appear within the Godhead) can be nothing other than a vagina penetrated by a you-know-what.¹⁷

Because of these objections, cumulatively as well as individually, and because I am not an initiate into what seems to be the new text-transforming Kabbalah of Luce Irigaray, I have difficulty in accepting Wolfson's conclusion that "the development of Jewish mysticism . . . can be seen as the move from an implicit to an explicit phallogocentrism" (p. 395). I do see the erotic as central to Kabbalah; I also recognize the phallic as a key symbol within the Zohar. But Wolfson's gaze

¹⁴ In Kabbalistic terms one might say that I find a disturbing *perud* (separation) in Wolfson's reading between the sixth and ninth *sefirot*, which in the Kabbalistic context is tantamount, among other things, to a separation of sex from love.

¹⁵ I am thinking of the highly romantic and less genital expressions of the love relationship between *tif'eret* and *shekhinah* found in the works of Kabbalists from Joseph Gikatilla, a member of the Zohar circle, to Meir Ibn Gabbai in sixteenth-century Turkey.

¹⁶ He tries to buttress this reading with an even more problematical reading of a midrash, which says that the women of Egypt were startled when they beheld the "yofyo shel Yosef" (the beauty of Joseph), meaning that they gazed at his phallus. But what prompts him to make these Egyptian ladies into *Playgirl* readers? Is male beauty only phallic? Even today viewers of soap operas swoon at the *faces* of lovely young men, and that seems to be quite enough for them.

¹⁷ I am not denying categorically the possibility of such interpretations, which are found in Liebes's writings ("The Messiah of the Zohar" [n. 6 above], and "Zohar and Eros" [n. 6 above]) as well as Wolfson's. I mean rather that one cannot take them for granted. There is a need to distinguish clearly between discussion of the ninth *sefirah*, where the Kabbalists themselves use phallic language, and the uppermost *sefirot*, where such terms are not used. In the latter case, it is only the scholarly interpreter who reads the symbols this way, and such interpretations are always open to question.

into this symbol has been extended too far. While this book remains, in my view, the most important work on Kabbalah by an American scholar, it is a major work significantly marred by this singularity of perspective, and thus one that must be used with caution insofar as it deals with this central subject.

In a revealing bit of methodological discussion that takes place early in the book (pp. 58 ff.), Wolfson distinguishes between what he calls introvertive and cognitive mystical types.¹⁸ The former seek to keep their gaze inward, away from images of all sorts, especially from the endlessly rich temptations of the imagination. These are the mystics of the *via negativa*, passing up the lure of all images for the truly formless One. The cognitive seek mystical knowledge by means of revelation, rather than by constant negation. For these there is no “transcending” of the sensory and imaginative; the very essence of the mystical journey lies in the lushness of fantastic—and especially erotic—imaginative vision. Wolfson then goes on to claim that Scholem, influenced by the introvertive model, saw ultimate mystical experience as one of transcending the symbolic universe that he acknowledged was the greatest creation of the Kabbalists (pp. 61–62). Wolfson himself, preferring the cognitive, sees neither the possibility of, nor any need for, escape from the presentiments of fantasy in the mystical quest.

Translated from the language of the history of religions back into that of Kabbalah, Scholem (as characterized by Wolfson) sees the rise and return to *Eyn Sof*, the endlessly transcendent mystery, as the highest goal. The mystic goes through the path of the *sefirot*, identifies with the many symbols of unification encountered along the way, but does not lose sight of the intermediary status of all symbolic forms. For Scholem’s Kabbalist, the *sefirot* are essentially vessels to contain the single and undifferentiated divine light.¹⁹ Wolfson’s Kabbalist basks in the light (or takes in the seed) of the two lowest *sefirot* as they engage in endless varieties of exquisite erotic union, mostly featuring the replacement of heterosexual coitus with the transformation of the tenth female/passive/receptive *sefirah* into the corona of the ninth, thus allowing male/female intercourse to reveal its true homoerotic or narcissistic self. It is in the varied expressions of human participation in this transformative event (the male Kabbalist identifying with the now “androgynous phallus” of God, etc.) that there lies the core of mystical experience, especially for the circle of the Zohar.

Between these two sharply drawn alternatives another reading suggests itself. The mystical reality is indeed that of divinity as it is found within the “sefirotic” world. But it is the entire realm of the *sefirot* and the infinite variety of symbolic interplays they offer that constitute that reality. The Kabbalist needs to experience the tension between the right and left “hands” of God, divine love and justice, the rebirth of his soul out of the primal womb of *binah*, or the rush of

¹⁸ I find this term somewhat misleading; “imaginative” might do better.

¹⁹ This is the Kabbalistic theology adumbrated, e.g., in the famous *pataḥ eliyahu*, a passage from the introduction to *Tiqquney Zohar*, printed in the Sephardic prayerbook and recited daily as a sort of Kabbalistic credo. Throughout their history Kabbalists have discussed the question of whether the *sefirot* are of the true essence of divinity (*asmut*) or are vessels (*kelim*) to contain that essence. The *summa* of these discussions is that of Moses Cordovero in the fourth chapter of his *Pardes Rimmonim* (1906; Jerusalem: M. Etiah, 1962), vol. 1, fols. 16–23.

ascent as all the *sefirot* are rejoined to *keter*, as much he does the androgyny resulting from the union of the ninth and tenth. The erotic fascination he encounters upon entering the outer gate of *malkhut* must indeed be transcended, not for an immediate formless loss of self in *Eyn Sof*, but so that he might go on to encounter all the other stages of the life journey in the divine realms that still await him on *shekhinah*'s (and his own) journey to the highest Crown. As for the 'a \bar{t} -arah, its ultimate place is on the head of God, a head that might just really be a head, and not merely an "upward displacement" of the phallus. No less an authority than Moses Cordovero, the great sixteenth-century synthesizer of Kabbalah, makes the point almost as though he had Wolfson's book in mind: "*Malkhut*²⁰ is called 'a \bar{t} arah. It is thus called *only*²¹ as it rises to the *keter*. There she is her husband's crown, the 'a \bar{t} arah of *tif'eret*.²² So too is she the crown on the head of every righteous one and the crown of the Torah scroll."²³

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²⁰ "Realm," the tenth *sefirah*.

²¹ Emphasis in original ("l \bar{o} ' niqret ken ela").

²² See Isa. 62:3; Jer. 13:18; Ezek. 16:12, 23:42.

²³ Cordovero, *Pardeš Rimmonim*, chap. 23, s.v. 'a \bar{t} arah.