

## The Journal of Religion

Breslauer succeeds in demonstrating that Kaplan is now more relevant than he was in the 1920s and 1930s, but that may be due more to the intrinsic merit of Kaplan's ideas than to what sometimes appear to be his postmodern sensibilities. The author fails to adequately discuss the manifestly modernistic roots and connections of Kaplan's thought. These appear to lie in the European enlightenment of the eighteenth century and in its Jewish counterpart, the *Haskalah* movement, as well as in such modernistic philosophical trends as pragmatism, empiricism, and pluralistic process thought. One should also not overlook the influence of the Protestant and Catholic churches in America on Kaplan and his close affinity to American religious naturalists such as Henry Nelson Wieman.

Breslauer attributes Kaplan's volatile attacks on supernaturalism, philosophy, and mysticism to his desire to anchor Judaism in American democratic values that are pluralistic, antielitist, and rational. But can the main thrust of Kaplan's consistent preaching, teaching, writing, and organizing for seven decades be explained primarily on utilitarian grounds without reference to deeply held ideological and spiritual convictions? The author is correct in attributing religious and ethical passion to Kaplan's reinterpretation of Judaism. In light of this, it is difficult for this reader to view his thought as essentially motivated by unconscious desires hostile to his expressed convictions and intentions. Like all great thinkers, Kaplan was ahead of his time, but he was also firmly planted in his time, and it is his own age that holds the key to his ideas.

The author's analysis and demolition of the major criticisms of Kaplan is a significant tour de force. He is too quick, however, to justify deviations from Kaplan's rationalism, antisupernaturalism, and antimysticism by the current generation of Reconstructionist activists. These deviations may frequently be seen as pandering to popular misunderstandings of "spirituality" rather than stemming from postmodernist ideological considerations. This book deserves wide reading and discussion by all those interested in the odyssey of religion in the modern as well as postmodern worlds.

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IDEL, MOSHE. *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic*. Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1995. x+438 pp. \$24.95 (cloth).

Eastern European Hasidism is a very late phenomenon in the history of Judaism. The last major religious movement to appear before the great changes of modernity, the Hasidic revival of the mid-eighteenth century, drew on the entire store of previous Jewish religious, and especially mystical, tradition. The direct and simple access to religious experience characteristic of popular revivalism required a new selective reading of the tradition, one that would provide, in wholly traditional garb, the appropriate theology and praxis. The vast homiletical literature of early Hasidism attests to that selective and interpretive process.

Moshe Idel, much-acclaimed scholar of the entire Jewish esoteric tradition, now turns his attention to this latest phase. We could imagine no better guide through this material. Idel's encyclopedic knowledge of the medieval literature allows him to see parallels and precedents that have previously gone unnoticed. Typical of his work is the vast reading he has done in the Hasidic sources, quoting an array of materials to dazzle the scholar, comparing them to an equally impressive assortment of earlier materials, many of them from little-known (and partially unpublished) magical compendia, and leading to some significant con-

clusions. His footnotes, constituting nearly half of this volume, provide an indispensable source for all future research on the subject.

Mysticism and magic, as is well known, are closely related in the Jewish tradition. Contrary to the blandishments of Evelyn Underhill, who saw mysticism at one end of a spectrum (pure self-sacrificial giving) and magic at the other (selfish, acquisitive), the evidence of Judaism both early (merkavah traditions) and late (Hasidism) regards them as close neighbors. The “higher” mystical literature often contains warnings against what is called “practical Kabbalah,” but many were the devotees and practitioners, including some of the greatest Kabbalists, who regularly crossed that line. Using his unparalleled knowledge of the magical sources, Idel offers a reading of Hasidism intended to show just how thoroughly these two elements within it are blended.

An advocate of phenomenological and typological readings, Idel seems to propose (I confess that his presentation is somewhat confusing here) that Hasidism combines the traditions of ecstatic Kabbalah with what he calls a mystical/magical approach. These in turn are differentiated from a theosophic/theurgic model, one associated by Idel primarily with Lurianic Kabbalah. Idel claims that Hasidism, while theoretically venerating the sainted Isaac Luria (1534–72), mostly abandoned his grand theosophical system in favor of a pastiche of Abulafian Kabbalah and Renaissance magic (of mixed Jewish, Hermetic, and Neoplatonic descent) received mostly through the writings of Moses Cordovero (1522–70) and his followers. This provided the theoretical underpinning for the extravagant claims Hasidism made for its leaders and their powers in linking the upper and lower worlds and their ability to rain blessings on those who followed them.

Of course the *Hasidim* did not accept Cordovero’s system any more than they did Luria’s. They used his writings, including his *Summa Kabbalistica*, *Pardes Rimmonim*, as a source of useful formulations, phrases that fit their own experience or could be transformed to do so. I believe they used the Lurianic sources in similar ways, and so I wonder whether Idel does not make too much of their purported abandonment of Lurianism. Revivalists have no use for *any* systematic theology other than to mine it for inspiring nuggets. Rather than concentrate on *which* sources they read, perhaps we should pay more attention to *how* the Hasidic masters made use of earlier sources, serving them up as grist for their insatiable homiletic mill.

Idel shows convincingly that Hasidic prayer and study techniques do reflect the once-esoteric traditions of Abulafian Kabbalah, concentrating on oral “letters” or sounds as “palaces” to contain the divine presence. Here he sees the Hermetic component as especially significant, human speech providing the earthly form on which the divine presence is to alight. Although I appreciate the historical precedents he quotes, I sometimes wonder whether Idel would not also designate Exod. 25:8 (“Let them make Me a tabernacle that I dwell in their midst”) as a “Hermetic” text. The typologies seem a bit heavy-handed here. I am not sure, for example, that one can clearly distinguish “magical” from “theurgic” in Hasidism, which describes its prayer life as being “for the sake of the *shekhinah*” as well as promising blessings of “children, [long] life, and sustenance.”

The Hasidic master is a sort of shaman, to be sure, and Idel is right to point this out. There are techniques of ascent, of concentration, and of drawing forth the divine life force that Hasidism inherits from the earlier tradition. No one could have documented these as richly as Idel has, and for this we should be grateful. But the movement is also suffused with an intense devotional pietism that is its truest characteristic, and this sometimes seems underplayed here. The

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sources say clearly that prayer needs the “wings” of love and awe; without these it can go nowhere. Idel does not fully disagree, but his emphasis on the technical and verbal sides of prayer seems to leave inadequate room for values that the authors themselves would have considered paramount.

Knowing the Jewish and Western magical traditions as well as he does, Idel surprisingly pays no attention to the question of local Eastern European magic and the effect it might have had on Hasidism. The Ba'al Shem Tov shared his Carpathian retreat with all sorts of Ukrainian saints and hermits. In the villages of those districts, women too played a role in the use of magic, including healing as well as the offering of blessings and curses, very much the preoccupation of Hasidic masters as well. Could the latter have learned nothing through that usually permeable border between religions? Were Abulafia and Alemanno, whose influence is rightly noted here, really closer channels of magical knowledge and praxis than the *baba* in the adjoining village? Idel's important study has opened some doors in the interpretation of Hasidism only to show us (in true mystical/magical fashion) how many more there are still to be opened.

As a final note, this volume could have been significantly improved by some careful editing. The prose is often unnecessarily turbid, the multiple categories presented in confusing and unexplained ways, place names butchered in their spelling, and the pages dotted with a shocking number of typographical errors.

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DESPLAND, MICHEL. *Reading an Erased Code: Romantic Religion and Literary Aesthetics in France.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994. viii+222 pp. \$45.00 (cloth).

Michel Despland's book argues that in nineteenth-century France a set of writers reformulated the meaning of religious belief by relating belief in a new way to the Christian Scriptures—a way rooted in the individual, and itself explicitly anti-traditional and anticlerical. Within this overarching purpose, Despland also seeks two related objectives: to counter views that place nineteenth-century literature in a too direct descent from religious belief and to introduce French material into discussions of romantic religion. Between introductory and concluding chapters are five successive chapters examining writings by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, August-René Chateaubriand, Charles Nodier, Alfred-Victor de Vigny, and Gérard de Nerval. The “erased code” expresses the lost status of the Scriptures as the authoritative repository of religious belief. “Romantic religion” refers broadly to the movement in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to locate religious belief in the individual, with specific reference to feeling and in explicit opposition to received ecclesiastical structure or inherited tradition. “Literary aesthetics” describes the stylistic innovations through which these five writers created a new, literary religiosity in nineteenth-century France.

The book convincingly demonstrates that the French example merits a place in the discussions of narrative and theology initiated by Hans Frei with reference to England and Germany (*The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* [New Haven, Conn., 1974]). Despland offers extended, nuanced, and persuasive readings of selected French authors on the basis of which he constructs his own, further narrative of the development of religious sensibility in nineteenth-century France. In structure his own narrative is chronological, and its intent is developmental. With the demise in the French Revolution of traditional political/ecclesial alliances, the