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Theurgy and Ecstasy

KABBALAH

New Perspectives.
By Moshe Idel.
419 pp. New Haven:
Yale University Press. \$40.

By Arthur Green

THE history of Judaism is being rewritten in the latter half of the 20th century. The rewriting is in large measure because of the "rediscovery" of kabbala — Jewish esoteric and mystical lore dating back to the 12th century. This work of historians and theologians is having a major effect on Jewish self-understanding in our times.

Long considered too scandalous an aberration from Hebraic monotheism to be worthy of serious consideration, the vast literature created by the kabbalists was neglected — and at times intentionally ignored — by those who presented Judaism to the modern reader. All this has changed over the last several decades, when a score of important studies have emerged, covering subjects that range from the relationship between Judaism and Gnosticism at the beginning of the Christian era down to the theological profundities of the Hasidic masters in the 19th century. Manuscripts that lay unedited and ignored for many hundreds of years have been brought to light, and thematic studies have begun to make their appearance.

Surely this rediscovery has something to do with the change in intellectual climate. The influence of Eastern religions in the academy as well as in the public domain has stimulated a growth in studies of mysticism in both Christianity and Islam, as well as Judaism. The emergence of Israel as the center of Jewish studies has fostered a willingness to examine sources in a manner unencumbered by the theological apologetics that have accompanied this discipline as practiced in the West. But the recovery of Jewish mysticism was to a remarkable degree the accomplishment of a single individual: the creation of this field and the towering figure of Gershom Scholem (1897-1982) were for more than half a century inseparable from each other. It was Scholem, and later his students, who did the pioneering manuscript research; it was Scholem alone, until near the end of his life, who wrote the histories and interpreted the texts for us.

For all of Scholem's fulminations against the prior German-Jewish scholarly generations that had so neglected kabbala, a younger group of American and Israeli scholars who began to study these materials in the last two decades could not but notice how close Scholem remained to the scholarly methods of those he sought so hard to reject. Scholem is the faithful intellectual historian. In his work, mystical practice is virtually ignored, comparative studies and the categories of the emerging phenomenology of religion are kept to the margins, and the implications of mysticism for Jewish theology are touched on only in a series of brief interviews in the very last years of Scholem's life.

The study of Jewish mysticism also suffered from certain biases of the master: his disdain for Talmudic Judaism and impatience with Jewish "legalism," as well as his rather clear attraction to mystical heresies, led to a picture of kabbala as unrooted in the rabbinic tradition and always existing in relative tension with normative Judaism. The ideology of cultural Zionism caused Scholem to place great emphasis on the struggle of the Jewish people against their existence in exile. He thus

Arthur Green is president of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in Philadelphia.

posited the trauma of the Jewish expulsion from Spain as a trigger event that set off a reaction leading to a mystical emphasis on redemption, a widespread mystical rebellion against exile in the 17th-century Sabbatean movement, and an anti-messianic quietistic tendency that set the stage for Hasidism, the late Eastern European version of Jewish mysticism that continues to exist as a significant force in contemporary Jewish life.

It was inevitable that Scholem's passing from the scene would call forth a series of revisionist studies. Until now these have emerged only in specific areas, especially the earliest period of Jewish mysticism, tied so closely to the emergence of Christianity and the rich realm of Gnostic studies. But now Moshe Idel, among the youngest of Scholem's students and an associate professor of Jewish thought at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, has taken on the task in its entirety. "Kabbalah: New Perspectives" is a magisterial work of scholarship, the like of which has not been seen in Judaic studies since Scholem's own "Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism," to which this work will inevitably be compared, or perhaps since the great histories of Jewish philosophy by Harry Austryn Wolfson. Like Wolfson, Mr. Idel writes as a scholar's scholar. His book presupposes extensive knowledge of the field and will make tough reading for the uninitiated. But Mr. Idel's book is studded with major insights and innovative approaches to

Mr. Idel returns the kabbala to the realm of religious thought.

the entire history of Judaism, and mastery of it will be essential for all serious students of Jewish thought.

Rejecting the strictly historical-chronological presentation of Jewish mysticism that characterized "Major Trends," Mr. Idel calls for a deeper integration of history and phenomenology, or examination of the kabbala on its own terms. Types of religious experience, categories of trans-rational thought and techniques of concentration all play a major role in Mr. Idel's understanding of mystical phenomena. The history of Jewish mysticism is portrayed here more as the interplay among these, rather than as the inward mirror reflecting the external vicissitudes of Jewish history. Mr. Idel posits two major schools of kabbalistic thought and practice: the theosophical-theurgic (quasi-magical) school, where the vision of the upper realms was accompanied by human activity to effect restoration of the cosmos; and the ecstatic school, in which the mystic's goal was contemplation alone, culminating in union with the divine and obliteration of the individual self.

The theurgic kabbalist is the classic symbol maker, well known from Scholem's work. But Mr. Idel rightly shows how deeply tied this symbolism is to the essential practice of Judaism, called halakhah, or Jewish law. He convincingly argues that something like a theurgic faith ("The Torah sustains the universe"; "Israel give strength to their Creator") motivated even the earliest rabbis in their extreme concern for proper performance of the commandments. Thus, he presents kabbalistic theurgy as a late articulation of values that underlay rabbinic Judaism from the beginning, rather than as a medieval reaction to Aristotelian rationalism. Even the essential symbolic skeleton of kabbala, the 10 Sefirot, or aspects of the Godhead, has its roots in ancient Jewish speculations, Mr. Idel claims. Starting from this premise, he performs a stunning reversal of all prior scholarship, asserting that Gnostic texts from late antiquity

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were themselves influenced by a now-lost Jewish speculative literature, rather than being the sources for the kabbala.

The other major kabbalistic school, the ecstatic, is here given its due for the first time. Scholem included but a single chapter on this school in "Major Trends" and never took the historical influence of its major figure, Abraham Abulafia, a 13th-century Spanish mystic, into account. Mr. Idel offers the reader a fascinating account of mystical techniques employed by the Abulafian school, including permutation of letters, visualization of colors and the intentional use of weeping to induce states of altered consciousness. He follows the history of this ecstatic-experiential school, primarily in the Near East (and influenced by Sufism) through the revival of Jewish esoteric sciences in 16th-century Safed, and thence to Hasidism. In another major scholarly reversal, Mr. Idel shows Hasidism to be an amalgam of the two schools of kabbalistic thought, but one that reserves theurgy for the elite and makes ecstatic practice, formerly the most closely guarded of kabbalistic secrets, accessible to the masses.

The thoroughgoing revisionism that characterizes this work is undertaken with hardly a hint of sharp-toned polemics. Nevertheless, if Mr. Idel is taken seriously, the Jewish historian is left somewhat bereft. The notion that the kabbalistic revival, and following it the Sabbatean movement, were responses to the Spanish exile, has already been repeated in a hundred textbooks and a thousand sets of college lecture notes. Scholem's further and most tantalizing suggestion, that the Jewish enlightenment was itself a kind of secularized Sabbateanism, has already been severely criticized. Now, historians will have to look elsewhere than in kabbala to understand the causes of those great upheavals that led to Jewish modernity.

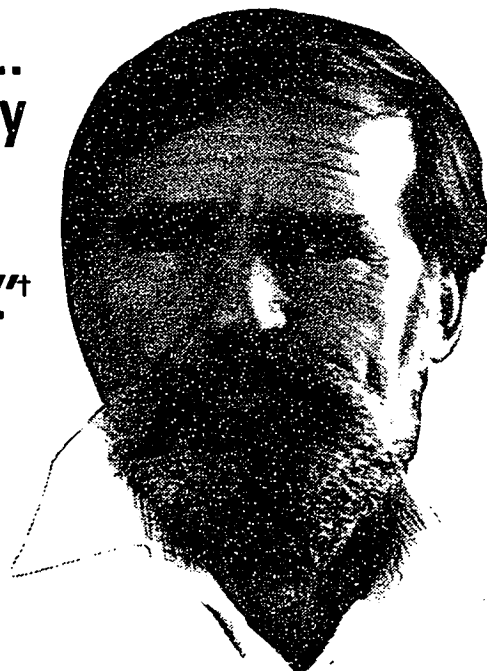
Mr. Idel's book returns the importance of kabbala and its study to the realm of religious thought. Historians of religion and scholars of comparative mysticism will no longer be able to ignore the evidence of the Jewish mystical tradition as they so long have, for Mr. Idel has made the techniques and descriptions of experience, as well as the ideas of kabbala readily accessible to them. More important still, however, will be the impact of this work on future Jewish theology. In an age thirsty for a more profound understanding of Judaism than is usually offered by either rabbis or academics, kabbala waits to be discovered by those who know how to make creative use of it. The literary remains of this tradition, stretching for nearly two millennia, provide an infinitely rich field in which the seeds of a contemporary Jewish theology might be sown. But that, as Scholem once quipped, remains the work of prophets, not professors. □

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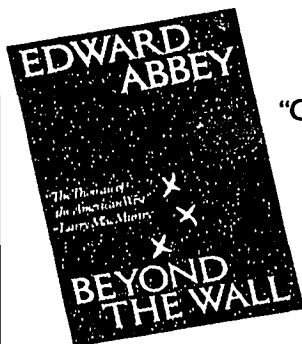
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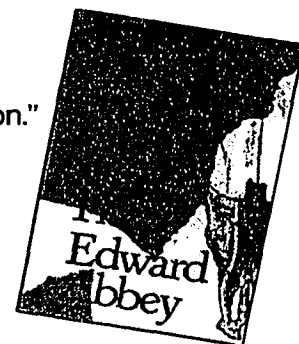
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