

THE MEANING OF THE TORAH
IN JEWISH MYSTICISM

I

Jewish mysticism represents the totality of the attempts to interpret in terms of mystical conceptions the meaning of rabbinical Judaism as it has crystallized in the time of the Second Temple and later. Such a development, of course, could take place only after this process of crystallization had attained a certain degree of fixity. This holds good for both the type of legal Judaism which Philo of Alexandria tried to interpret, as well as for the more developed type of Talmudic Judaism which served as a frame for the spiritual efforts of the Medieval Kabbalists. It is not my purpose to discuss here the historical problems of the development of Jewish mysticism, and especially of Kabbalism; I have done so in other places, especially in my book *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*.¹ On the other hand, the subject with which I propose to deal here occupies a central place in Jewish mysticism. In a religious system that is based on Divine Revelation and the acceptance of Holy Scriptures which determine its tenets, the questions connected with the essential nature of such revelation in Scripture are obviously vital ones. Moreover, in a time of crisis—and mysticism as a histori-

1. Jerusalem, Schocken, 1941.

cal phenomenon is a child of times of crises—such questions are especially pressing. Mystics are people who, through their own experience and speculation on such experience, detect new layers of meaning in their traditional religion. If this kind of experience and speculation does not lead them to break away from the traditional institutional framework of their religion, then the first question bound to come up is how to find their own experience reflected or anticipated in their sacred texts; also how to reconcile their vision of things with that accepted by their own tradition. It is, of course, a truism that allegorical interpretation makes its appearance spontaneously whenever new ideas clash with those of a holy book, seemingly standing in contradiction to them and requiring some process of reconciliation. What is true of allegorical interpretation applies even more so to mystical interpretation in a more precise sense.

I do not intend to discuss here mystical exegesis in its concrete application to Scripture. There is an enormous wealth of literature wherein the Jewish mystics have tried to read their own thoughts into the Biblical texts. A large part of Kabbalistic literature consists in commentary to Biblical books, especially the Pentateuch, the Five Scrolls, and the Psalms. Many of the most creative minds among the Kabbalists have found this a most congenial method for conveying their own ideas, and, at the same time, of making these ideas seem to flow, as it were, naturally out of Scripture. It is not always easy to say in a given instance whether Scripture actually gave the impetus to the birth of the exegesis, or whether the exegesis is an artificial creation designed to bridge the gap that frequently opens between an old and a new vision. Perhaps this formulation of what actually happens in the mystic mind is already too rationalistic an explanation. For, as a matter of fact, the mind of the mystic works to a great extent unconsciously, and he may be altogether unaware of the clash which the historian is only too eager to point out. As far as he is also a traditionalist, he is very much immersed in his own tradition, and many things which to the modern reader appear like fanciful impositions on the text are to him connected quite naturally with his own conception of the essential nature of Scripture.

For the first thing that could be surely said of the Kabbalist is precisely this: he is indeed and strives to be a traditionalist, as is already indicated by the term *Kabbalah* itself, which is one of the Hebrew terms for tradition.

It is therefore important to understand the essential assumptions on which such concrete exegesis is based. It is primarily this problem I wish to discuss here. For the clarification of these assumptions we are not obliged to

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rely on implication alone, since they are formulated often enough in a precise and illuminating way. The mystical speculation on the essence of the Torah goes hand in hand with the development of certain general principles. Some of these speculations have developed in a rather peculiar way, not common to all Kabbalists, but characteristic rather of some special trend in Kabbalism. It will be interesting to show how such different ideas were connected with the first principles from which they developed.

Much has been said about Philo of Alexandria's ideas on the symbolic meaning of the Torah.² I am not going to add to this. In discussing the specific ideas of the Kabbalists we are sure to find some rather striking parallels to passages in Philo. Such parallels are not due to any historical connection linking Philo and the Medieval Kabbalists. As far as they go, they are due to the similarity of their basic structure of approach. This might equally well be said of the parallels which we could easily find between some of the Kabbalistic statements on the Torah and those of Moslem mystics concerning the Koran, or, for that matter, of Christian mystics concerning Scripture. Only an analysis of the historical circumstances under which certain Kabbalistic ideas developed can establish whether or not any historical connection actually existed between Kabbalistic and non-Jewish speculation on the nature of Holy Writ. In at least one instance, as will be shown, I believe that such a relationship did exist.

But before I summarize my findings on our subject, at least one preliminary point should be made. The entire, or at least the most essential part, of Kabbalistic speculation and doctrine is concerned with the sphere of Divine emanations or *Sephiroth* in which the creative power of God unfolds. Whatever different ways the Kabbalists developed of describing this sphere—and there are many systems during the long history of Kabbalism—it is this subject with which their intuition is primarily concerned, and which they describe in the language of symbols, since it is not open to immediate perception by the human mind. God, as He reveals Himself, does so through the mediation of His creative power. God, as He is spoken of in religion, is always conceived under one or several of those aspects of His being which the Kabbalists saw as different stages in the process of Divine emanation. It is this world which they conceive as the world of the *Sephiroth* which comprises what philosophers and theologians called the world of Divine attributes, but which to the mystics appeared as

2. Cf. Harry Wolfson, *Philo*, Vol. I (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1947), pp. 115–43; Edmund Stein, *Die allegorische Exegese des Philo aus Alexandria* (Giessen, Töpelmann, 1929).

the Divine life itself, as far as it proceeds towards creation. The hidden dynamics of this life fascinate the Kabbalists, and they find it reflected in every sphere of creation. But this life in itself is not something separated from Divinity, something inferior to it; it is the revelation of the Hidden Root, of which, since it never appears even in symbols, nothing can be said, and which the Kabbalists called *Ensof*, the infinite. And this Hidden Root and His emanations are one.

I do not want to plunge into the paradoxes and mysteries of Kabbalistic theology concerning these *Sephiroth* and their nature, which would be quite outside the scope of this paper. The point I wish to make, however, is this: The process which, on the one hand, is described as the emanation of Divine *energy and light* could be described equally well as the process in which the Divine *language* unfolds. This constitutes an essential parallelism between the two kinds of symbolism chosen by the Kabbalists to describe their ideas. They speak of attributes and spheres of light, but they speak in the same connection also of Divine names and of the letters of which they are composed. From the first appearance of Kabbalistic teachings, these two *façons de parler* appear together. The secret world of God is a world of language, a world of Divine names which, in their own way, develop out of each other. The elements of the Divine language appear as the letters of the Holy Writ. The letters and the names are no conventional means of communication. They are much more than that. Each of them represents a concentration of energy and expresses some fullness of meaning which may not be translatable into human language, or, at least, not exhaustively. There is, of course, an obvious discrepancy between these two modes of description I have mentioned. When the Kabbalists use the language of Divine attributes and *Sephiroth*, they describe this hidden world in terms of ten aspects, whereas in speaking of Divine names and letters they must necessarily have reference to the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet in which the Torah is communicated. Several solutions were offered to explain the seeming contradiction. It could be argued, for instance, that letters and *Sephiroth* are different configurations of Divine power, and therefore not mechanically identical. What matters for our present consideration, however, is the parallelism which is thus offered between Creation and Revelation. The process of Creation unfolding from stage to stage and reflected in the worlds outside of God, and even in Nature, is therefore not essentially different from the process which finds expression in Divine words and in the documents of Revelation understood to contain them.

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These considerations will take us right into the heart of our matter. The mystical meaning of the Torah is necessarily connected with the assumptions about its Divine essence. The Kabbalist does not proceed from the concept of meaning. The Torah, of course, quite obviously means something to us. It communicates something in human language. This, however, as we shall see, is only the most outward of the several aspects under which it can be viewed. What these several aspects are we shall presently discuss.

There are three basic principles which appear in the Kabbalistic speculation on the nature of the Torah. They are not always necessarily connected with one another, although they often appear together in our texts, and it is not difficult to see how they can be related to each other. Let me call them: 1. The principle of the Name of God. 2. The principle of the Torah as an organism. 3. The principle of the infinite meaning of the Divine world. Historically, and I think also psychologically, they are not all of the same origin. In analyzing them it will be well to keep this important fact in mind.

II

The conception of the Divine Name as the highest concentration of Divine power forms a link between the realm of ideas connected primarily with magic and that connected with mystical speculation proper. In the history of early Kabbalism this connection can be easily traced. But let me proceed from the beginning. The conception of the magic nature of the Torah is already found in a fairly early Midrash. Rabbi Eleazar made the following comment on the verse (Job 28:13) "No man knoweth its order: The various sections of the Torah were not given in their proper order. For were they to have been given in proper order, all who would read them would have the power to resuscitate the dead and to perform miracles. Therefore the proper arrangement of the Torah has been kept hidden, although it is known to the Holy One, blessed be He."³

The magical implications of this saying are obvious. We know indeed that in Hellenistic times and later both in Jewish and non-Jewish circles, the Torah was put to such magical use by invoking Divine names found therein, or magical ones derived from combinations of its letters—combinations often arrived at by methods unintelligible to us. Among Hebrew

3. *Midrash Tehillim*; ed. Solomon Buber (Wilna, Wittwe & Gebrüder Romm, 1891), p. 35.

and Aramaic texts from the late Talmudic and post-Talmudic periods we have some books which describe the specific use made by such magical names which were said to be derived from certain passages in the Torah and the Book of Psalms. The introduction to one of these books—*Shimushei Torah*—tells how Moses ascended to Heaven at the time of the giving of the Torah, how he conversed with the angels, and how he was finally given by God Himself not only the text of the Torah as we read it but also those hidden combinations of letters which in their totality comprise another and esoteric aspect of the Torah. It was this literary source which came to be known to the first Kabbalists in Provence and Spain about the year 1200. Moses ben Nahman of Gerona (Nahmanides), one of the outstanding early Kabbalists, refers to this book in his preface to his celebrated commentary on the Pentateuch. He says: “We have a true tradition that the whole of the Torah is comprised of names of God, inasmuch as the words which we read can also be divided into names in a quite different way. . . . The Midrashic reference to the Torah having been written in black fire upon white seems to point to what we have said; namely, that the writing was continuous without division into words, making it possible to read it both as a sequence of names (*al derech hashemot*) as well as in our accepted way of history and commandments. Thus the Torah was given to Moses in a form where its divisions into words offers a reading for the understanding of the commandments. At the same time he received an oral tradition on its reading as a sequence of names.” This esoteric constitution of the Torah explains, according to Nahmanides, why the utmost care must be given to the Masoretic tradition concerning every individual letter and why a Torah Scroll even becomes invalid for use where there is error in *plene* or *defective* writing. Every single letter counts.

The quotation from Nahmanides plainly shows the influence of the magical tradition, which was of course much older than Kabbalism. But from here it was only a short step to an ever more radical view; namely, that the Torah does not consist only of the names of God, but constitutes in fact the one great Name of God. This is no longer a magical, but a purely mystical thesis. The transition from the older to the new view seems to have taken place in the circle of Nahmanides’ teachers. Ezra ben Solomon, an older contemporary of Nahmanides who lived in the same town of Gerona writes, commenting on a passage in the *Midrash Genesis Rabbah* (III: 5) where it is said that the word ‘light’ is mentioned five times in the story of the first day to correspond to the five books of the Torah: “How far-reaching are the words of this Sage, and his words are true in-

deed. For the five books of the Torah are *the name* of the Holy One, blessed be He.”⁴ The same statement recurs in the writings of several members of this Geronese group, and was finally taken over by the author of the Zohar, the classical text of Spanish Kabbalism.⁵

I assume that this new idea was well known to Nahmanides himself, but he refrained from expressing it in a work intended for the general public. To say that the Torah was essentially nothing but the one great Name of God was certainly a daring statement calling for comment. Here we have the conception of the Torah as a mystical unit, the primary aim of which is not to convey communication of a particular meaning, but to express the power of God Himself, conceived as concentrated in His Name. The whole conception of the Torah as a Name does not mean a Name which can be pronounced as such, and has nothing to do with a rational understanding of the function of a name. The Torah as the Name of God means that God has expressed His transcendental *being* through it, or in any case that part of His being which may be revealed to Creation and through Creation. Moreover, since the Torah was already regarded by the old Midrash as the instrument of Creation, through which the world came into being, this new conception of the Torah should be understood as an enlargement upon the more ancient view; namely, the instrument which gave the world being is much more than a mere instrument, being, as I have said, the concentrated power of God Himself, expressed in the Name. This implies, of course, a further idea as well. Another ancient Midrash tells us that God “looked into the Torah and created the world.” The author of this statement must have thought that the law governing Creation was already prefigured in the Torah and seen there by God, even though this aspect of the Torah be hidden from us. Statements like those quoted above combined into one idea in the mind of the Kabbalist. The Name contains power but comprises as well the secret laws and order governing all being. The Kabbalists, moreover, read in esoteric and apocalyptic books from the Talmudic period that Heaven and Earth were created by the name of God.⁶ It was not a long step from there to combine this statement with that about the Torah as the instrument of Creation.

This basic idea of the Torah as the name of God gave rise to several additional developments. It is of course obvious that the statement about the

4. Ezra ben Solomon, commentary on the Talmudic Aggadahs, MS Vatican Hebr. 294, fol. 34 a.

5. Zohar II, 87 b; III, 80 b.

6. *Hehaloth rabbati*, chap. 9.

Torah does not refer to the Torah written down in ink on a scroll, but to the Torah as a preexistent being which in itself was created before everything else, as is testified by the Aggadic statement that the Torah preceded the creation of the world by 2,000 years. To the Kabbalist this “creation of the Torah” meant nothing but the process by which the Divine Name, or that world of Divine *Sephiroth* which I have mentioned before, emanated from His hidden being. The Torah as the Kabbalists conceived it is therefore not something separated from God’s being, it is no longer a created thing in the proper sense of the word, but rather something representative of that secret life of God which the Kabbalistic theory of emanations tried to describe. The Torah in this most hidden aspect is called in the Kabbalistic literature of the 13th century *Torah Kedumah*, the primordial Torah, and is frequently identified with God’s wisdom (*hokhmah*), the second emanation and manifestation of His power that came out from the hidden “nothingness.” We shall see further on how some Kabbalists pictured to themselves the state of the Torah when it was still contained as a mystical unit in God’s wisdom. Some Kabbalists made it plain that the thesis of the Torah being the name of God refers to this state of its being identical with or part of God’s wisdom. But there were also other explanations.

Another qualification of this theory is to be found in the writings of Joseph Gikatila, an outstanding Spanish Kabbalist who wrote at the end of the 13th century, and certainly already knew something of the Zohar. According to him, the Torah is the explication of the name of God. For him the Name means precisely what it meant to tradition, namely the Tetragrammaton, as the one and truly proper name of God. He says: “Know that the whole Torah is like an explication or commentary on the name of the Tetragrammaton JHWH. This is what is meant by the Biblical phrase *Torat adonai* (The Torah of God) in its true sense. The true meaning of this phrase does not refer to the Torah as given by God, but rather to the Torah as *horaah*, i.e., an explanation of the name of God.”⁷ But there is more in Gikatila’s mind. In what sense does the Torah constitute an explanation of the name of God? His answer, expounded in many parts of his book, is that the Torah is woven out of the name of God. It seems that he was the first to use this term, *ʿarigah* (something woven), in order to describe how the name of God reappears in the texture of the Torah. He says, for instance: “Know the miraculous way in which the Torah was woven in God’s wisdom.” Or in another place: “The whole Torah is woven out

7. Gikatila, *Shaʿarei ʿOvah* (Offenbach, 1713), fol. 51 a.

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of the *kinuyim*—the Hebrew term for the appellatives of God, such as Merciful, Awe-inspiring, Great—and the *kinuyim* out of the different names of God (such as *El, Elokim, Shaddai*). And the holy names are all of them dependent on the Tetragrammaton JHWH, all of them being united with it: therefore the whole of the Torah is woven, in the last analysis, out of the Tetragrammaton.”⁸ This seems to me to be a very illuminating thesis. The Torah is the name of God because it constitutes a living texture into which the one true name—the Tetragrammaton—has been woven in hidden and devious ways. The Torah is a structure, whose basic element is the Tetragrammaton. If Gikatila were asked how precisely the weaving was done, he would have given the answer of his teacher Abraham Abulafia that the basic elements, the names and *kinuyim*, were changed by permutation and new combinations of letters, according to the various formulas given for such changes by the Talmudists, until they appeared in the form of the Hebrew verses of the Torah as we read them now. Working backwards from an understanding of these principles, the original texture of names could be detected by the illuminates. These changes have a two-fold function. They serve, on the one hand, to give the Torah that aspect in which it is seen as a communication from God to man, open to his understanding. On the other hand, these processes indicate the hidden working of the Divine power discernible only by the clothing which the Holy Names take on when serving specific purposes in Creation. Finally, it should be said that this principle of the Torah as a texture woven out of the Name does not serve any practical purpose of exegesis. It is a mystical principle which rather tends to remove the Torah more and more from human insight into the contexts of its meanings, which, after all, is what counts for exegesis. This fact did not deter the Kabbalist. God expressing Himself, however far removed such expression be from human understanding, is infinitely more important than any specific “meaning” such expression may convey. The Torah seen in this way is an *absolutum*, primary to any phase of human interpretation, which, however deep it may be, is perforce always a relativization of its absolute character.

Some Kabbalists, as for instance Menahem Recanati (about 1300) have gone even further. Drawing upon an old saying, “Before the creation of the world God and his Name were one,” they taught that the Name spoken of here is not only the Tetragrammaton JHWH, but comprises the totality of the many manifestations of God’s power, which is the Name in its mystical sense. They could, therefore, go one step further and say that God Himself

8. *Ibid.*, fol. 2 b.

is the Torah, “for the Torah is not outside of Him, neither is He outside the Torah.”⁹ Tecanati quotes this from the Sages of the Kabbalah, and indeed a similar statement is quoted from them in Gikatila’s “Book on the Mystical Reasons of the Commandments”: “His Torah is in him, and this is what the Kabbalists say that the Holy One, blessed be He, is in His Name and His Name is in Him, and His Name is His Torah.”¹⁰ In the same book he amplifies the statement elsewhere, drawing upon an old formula found in the hymns of the Merkaba mystics: “It is a great thing which the ancients said ‘Thy Name is within Thee, and within Thee is Thy Name.’ For the letters of His Name are Himself. Although moving away from Him, they are still securely rooted in Him” (literally, flying and standing in Him. *Ki ʔotiiyot porchoṯ veʔomdot bo*).¹¹ He explains this by saying that the letters are like a body to Him, and He like a soul to the letters. This comparison of God and His Torah to the relation of soul and body leads to the second principle which I shall now discuss.

III

This second principle of the Torah as a living organism is suggested by several lines of Kabbalistic thought. Not only does the reference to soul and body in the just mentioned quotation from Gikatila suggest such a conception, but the very idea of the Torah being woven out of the Holy Names implies by way of a different metaphor that the Torah is a living texture. But the idea of the Torah as an organism is much older, having been already formulated with much clarity by the earliest Kabbalists in Spain. Ezra ben Solomon of Gerona writes in his commentary to Canticles that the Torah does not contain even one unnecessary letter or dot, “because it is in its Divine totality a structure hewn out of the name of the Holy One, blessed be He.”¹² What kind of Divine structure *ʔelohi binyan* is intended is made clear by a long exposition on this subject which Ezra’s younger contemporary, Azriel of Gerona, incorporated in his Kabbalistic commentary to the Talmudic Aggadah. He, too, starts from the assumption that the Torah is the Name of God and is a living body with a soul. The Masoretic peculiarities of the Torah as revealed in the different types

9. Recanati, *Taʕamei ha-mitzwoth* (Bâle, 1580), fol. 3 a. A similar statement is found in the *Zohar* II, 60 a: God himself is called Tora.

10. MS Jerusalem Univ. Libr. 8° 597, fol. 21 b.

11. *Ibid.*, fol. 228 b.

12. Ms. Leiden, Warner 32, fol. 23 a.

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of paragraphs and divisions, as well as other distinctive signs, indicate to him a comparison with a complete organic structure: "such as in the body of man there exist limbs and joints, and just as there are vital organs in the human body together with other organs upon which life does not depend, so, too seemingly is the case with the Torah. Certain sections and verses appear to him who does not know their hidden meaning as worthy of being put to the fire, but to him who has attained a knowledge of their true meaning, they appear as essentials of the Torah. Therefore one who omits even one letter or dot from the Torah is like one who removes something from a perfect structure. It follows as well that there is no essential difference in divine character between the section in Genesis 36 listing the chiefs of Esau and the Ten Commandments, for the whole is a single entity and one structure."¹³

Here we have a clear combination of the two principles: the Torah is a Name, but the Name is constructed like a living organism. The Name at the root of all is not only an *absolutum* but divides itself in the process of its manifestation in the Torah into the various strata of organic being. There is this difference, however, that an ordinary organism is divided into more vital and less vital parts, whereas in the Torah such a distinction is only apparent, because the true mystic detects the secret importance even in the seemingly unimportant parts.

It is fitting to mention here the similar statement which Philo makes about the Jewish sect of the Therapeutae: "For the whole Torah (*nomothesia*) seems to these men to be like a living being; the literal understanding is the body, but the soul is the hidden meaning underlying the written word."¹⁴ There is no valid reason to assume any historical connection between the Kabbalists and the old Jewish sectarians in Egypt in Philo's day. The approach of the mystic to the sacred text expresses itself quite naturally in similar ways.

This idea of the Torah as an organism reappears also in the Zohar, composed some 50 years after Azriel's work. Here we read: "Whoever labours in the Torah upholds the world and enables each part to perform its function. For there is not a member in the human body but has its counterpart in the world as a whole. For as man's body consists of members and joints of various ranks, all acting and reacting upon each other so as to form one organism, so does the world at large consist of a hierarchy of creatures which form precisely one organic body. Thus the whole is organized on

13. Azriel, *Perush ḥagadath*, ed. Y. Tishby (1943), p. 37.

14. Philo, *De vita contemplativa*, ed. Conybeare, p. 119.

the scheme of the Torah, which consists of limbs and joints forming a hierarchy and act and react upon each other and form one organism.”¹⁵ Another simile for the same idea occurs in another passage (*ibid.*, III, 202 a) and is even more succinctly expressed by Moses de Leon, whom I consider to be the author of the main part of the Zohar, in one of his Hebrew writings: “For the Torah is called the tree of life. . . . And just as the tree consists of branches, leaves, bark, sap, and root, each one of which may be called tree without making any differentiation, so, too, you find that the Torah contains many inner and external matters, all being one Torah and one tree without differentiation. . . . Although we find in the words of the Talmudic sages that one prohibits and one permits, one pronounces something ritually fit while another declares it unfit, one holding a certain view and other the opposite view, know, therefore, that all is nevertheless one unity.”¹⁶ The author of the *Tikunei Zohar* (n. 21, f. 52 b), writing only a few years after the composition of the main part of the Zohar, says: “The Torah has a head, body, heart, mouth, as well as other limbs, in the same fashion as Israel.” Here we have the parallel between the two mystic organisms of the Torah and the community of Israel. Although the two ideas are found only in separate passages in the Zohar, the parallelism between them is first established by the author of the *Tikunim*. The mystical organism of the Torah, embodying the name of God, is thus brought into correlation with the mystical body of the community of Israel, considered by the Kabbalists not only as the historical organism of the Jewish nation, but as an esoteric symbol of the Shekhinah itself, the individual members of the body of Israel being, as it were, “limbs of the Shekinah.” Later Kabbalists, as we shall presently see, drew ever more precise conclusions from this correlation.

15. Zohar I, 135 b., based mostly on the translation by Simon and Sperling, Vol. II (London, Soncino, 1932), p. 36.

16. Moses de Leon, Sefir ha-rimmon, Ms. British Museum, Marg. Hebr. Ms. 759, fol. 100 b.

Ed. note: The last part of this article will appear in the next issue.