

II: The Primordial Light: The Ecstatics' Quest
Thursday 18 April 1991

[The introduction to the lecture mentioned that the lecture series would eventually be coming out as a book to be published by the University of Washington Press.]

[The introducer mentioned an article in the Jerusalem Post about Scholem and Idel. Idel has established the basis for a critical look at Scholem's work. Scholem's approach was historical and contextual: he interpreted the Kabbalah as a system of thought. Idel's approach is phenomenological: he endeavors to discern what the symbolism and ritual meant to those who practised it. For Idel, the Kabbalah is not a system of ideas but a practical path to mystical experience. For Scholem, Kabbalah entered Judaism from the outside, and was the result of the influence of Greek gnosticism on Rabbinic Judaism. It was, in effect, an alien heresy with an underground existence. For Idel, Kabbalah is an esoteric tradition flowing from within Judaism itself, though with links and correspondences with other mystical traditions. Idel feels that the study of the manuscript tradition has just barely begun, and that therefore most of the field has yet to be explored.

He also feels that even the most theoretical texts are experientially oriented. This has led him to try to reconstruct the techniques that were actually used. He has done so in part through observation of practices of ultra-Orthodox communities in Israel - and they in turn have come to him for technical advice on reading and understanding their texts.]

There is another paradigm through which the story of the entry to Pardes can be read - one which is not philosophical, but ecstatic. This variety of paradigms by the way is very important. It shows that Jews were less interested in establishing a unified theology than they were in finding secret interpretations that would attract many different kinds of people. They were open to having a different way for each sort of person. This is a sign of the openness of the elite culture to allowing

different approaches for a variety of people - not so much to attract the masses, but to allow for diversity among the elite.

This second interpretation of the Pardes was the result of the merger of Jewish mysticism and Neoplatonic philosophy. For Maimonides, it was a Pardes ha Chokmah, a Pardes of Knowledge. It had to do with the solution to cognitive problems. For Maimonides, Adam was lost in contemplation of metaphysical truths. Thus, for Maimonides, R. Aqiva was the central figure, the most perfect of the four sages.

But for some Kabbalists at the beginning of the Thirteenth Century the major figure was not R. Aqiva but Ben Azzai, the Talmudic master who died. For them, the Pardes was not a matter of intellect, but of the experience of a supreme light. This Light was not an intellectual or conceptual light, but an experiential light.

Ancient Jewish textual material is rich in emphasis on the importance of light - as in Genesis, where Light is the first created entity. Midrashic texts portray Adam as an entity of Light, and as having garments of Light, which were lost after his expulsion from Eden. In this tradition, the basic activity of Adam was the contemplation of the Light, of the Shekinah. The "Light of the Shekinah" is a key term in these texts.

Both Pardes and Paradise, in this tradition, are seen as full of Light. Adam's experience in the Fall is the loss of the possibility of contemplating the Light. The loss of garments of Light leads to their replacement by garments of skin (a pun in Hebrew). This loss of the possibility of experience of the Light is crucial in ancient Hebrew texts.

For example, in the Book of Adam and Seth (as preserved in Armenia): "But Adam .. in being stripped of the Divine Light .. became an equal of the dumb beasts. Enoch for forty days and nights did not eat. Then he planted a garden .. and was in it for 552 years. Then he was taken up into heaven" [The quotation was quite a bit longer; unfortunately, I couldnot keep up.] This portrays an attempt by Enoch to reconstruct and re-enter the situation of Adam. This is a basic pattern in later discussions of the Pardes texts: an attempt to return to the ability to contemplate the Light as Adam once did.

In the Hekhaloth texts, too, the idea of Light is paramount. Pardes is described as full of the radiance of Light.

There is a manuscript text by an unknown author - one which I needed some 60 pages to analyze, so we can only deal with a small part of

it here. There are some ten lines in it about Ben Azzai (who did not return). "Ben Azzai peeked and died. He gazed at the radiance of the Divine Presence like a man with weak eyes who gazes at the full light of the sun and becomes blinded by the intensity of the light that overwhelms him... He did not wish to be separated, he remained hidden in it, his soul was covered and adorned ... he remained where he had cleaved, in the Light to which no one may cling and yet live." [Quotation approximate]

This text portrays people gazing not at a Chariot or a marble throne, but at the radiance of God (Tzvi ha Shekinah), a light so strong that no one can bear it. The idea of "overwhelming" is textually crucial. The idea of having a great desire to cleave, as described in the medieval text, is new. In ancient literature, contemplation is of something far away, across an unbridgeable gap. There is no idea there of love, only of awe. Here, however, we see a trace of a radical change: the intensity of the experience is linked with a great desire to cleave to the radiance of the Shekinah. There is a strong experience of union with the Divine, the result of a desire to enter and become a part of the Divine realm. There is an attempt to enjoy the Divine without interruption. The language of desire implies erotic overtones to the experience, especially since "Shekinah" in Hebrew is feminine. The text then is speaking about an attempt to cleave to a feminine aspect of the Divine - also a development unique to the medieval literature (and not found in the ancient literature). And also the idea of "sweet radiance" has erotic overtones.

So what happened? He couldn't return from the experience. The Hebrew terms are very strong. After his death he was "hidden away in the place of his cleaving." This death was the death of the pious ones whose souls are separated from all concerns with the mundane world, and who cleave to the supernal world. It was, in other words, not an accident but an achievement.

There is a threefold structure implied here, reminiscent of Christian and Neoplatonic mysticism. The first phase is the *via purgativa*, "Those who are separated from all concerns of the lowly world." The second phase is the *via illuminativa*. The third phase is the *via unitiva*. There is here a combination of ancient Jewish material with pagan or Christian Neoplatonist material to portray or interpret the experience of Ben Azzai. This interpretive paradigm continued in active use from the

Thirteenth through the Eighteenth centuries, where it was used among the Hasidim. It was a tradition that lasted 600 to 700 years, and it is exactly the kind of tradition it is hard to study without looking at manuscripts.

This text was also copied by a Thirteenth Century Kabbalist who gave it an even stronger nuance of mysticism. Ben Azzai died because of the cleaving of his soul out of a great love; his soul didn't return because he reached a great attainment. The assumption: out of intense love, his cleaving was total. Later, there were even stronger formulations, in which the soul and the Light become one entity.

This text is one example of texts dealing with the unio mystica. It allows for bridging in a total manner the gap between man and God. This is another example of the formative power of the Neoplatonic mystical tradition, as it also expressed itself in Christianity and Islam.

However, for the Kabbalists the major events took place in the past. He is reporting not on a contemporary but on Ben Azzai. Is this simply a matter of an interpretation? Or is there something more to it - a practical interest? Can we extract from the sources a method, a practice?

In my opinion, since the end of the Thirteenth Century there is evidence that there were experiences of Light connected with the story of Ben Azzai and the Kabbalists who discussed it - but this is not always simple to demonstrate.

Another anonymous text, written in 1290 or so in Galilee, describes a technique, and afterward describes a personal experience characterized by amazement, confusion, and a need for clarification and interpretation. Its author describes the Divine Light as attracting the Light of the soul, "which is weak in relation to the Divine Light." (There is a magnetic metaphor here, and we can see in this adoption of non-traditional metaphors an attempt to come to terms with personal experience.) This experience was the result of letter-combination techniques. Later the anonymous Kabbalist attempts to describe how he approached a master to learn a technique to stop the experience. Thus, discussing this experience in terms of the story of Ben Azzai is an attempt to relate personal experience to a model. It is not simply an attempt to provide an interpretation for the story of Ben Azzai.

Another ecstatic Kabbalist also relates his experience to the story of Ben Azzai: "If a man does that which his soul wishes in the proper

ways of hitbodeduth, his soul is immersed in this light and he will die like Ben Azzai."

The Kabbalists tried to reach the pre-fall state of the Primordial Man, to enter again the radiance of the Shekinah, and even to enter a certain erotic relationship with the Divine Presence, as later we find in the Zohar in other forms. They also provided, by the end of the Thirteenth Century, certain detailed techniques. "By letter combinations, unifications, and reversals of letters, he shall call up the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil... [list of encounter with various polarized qualities and entities, e.g., Mercy and Severity] ... he will be in danger of the same death as Ben Azzai."

Beginning with the end of the Fourteenth Century, there are descriptions of Kabbalists studying together, and of each observing the others to see if they become luminous. "Likewise today, if someone will look at the faces of students who are worshipping out of love .. you will see on them the radiance of the Divine Presence so that those who see them will be afraid, and each of them will have the radiance of the Divine Presence according to his rank." There is, in other words, the expectation of a corporeally observable radiance.

For Maimonides the experience of the Pardes was mental, with no outward sign; for the Kabbalists it was corporeal and visible.

For Maimonides, God was an intellect; for the Kabbalists, God was a radiance.

For Maimonides, Adam was a perfect intellect; for the Kabbalists, Adam was a creature of Light.

For Maimonides, Paradise and Pardes were intellectual (cerebral) states; for the Kabbalists, they were corporeal, sensuous, erotic, sexual and an object for practical striving.

The Kabbalists developed techniques - Maimonides had no clear method.

The Kabbalists attempted to describe techniques, and signs of attainment.

Thus the Kabbalistic tradition is not one of speculations about mysticism; it is full-fledged mysticism. In the Kabbalistic tradition, an extreme type of experience is sought out and considered positive.

The mystical death is the real goal of ecstatic Kabbalah. For Maimonides, the ideal is to remain in a state of intellection. For the ecstatic Kabbalists, extreme experience is final experience.

The Pardes was thus idealized by Jewish mystics, and given new meanings. This idealization opened another avenue, one exploited especially by Eighteenth Century Hasidic mysticism. We can see a continuous line from the beginning of the Kabbalah up to the founder of the modern Hasidic movement who himself quoted parts of the same text. This can be understood as an inner Jewish development, and not a historical accident.

Questions

Q: Did all Kabbalists wish actual death? For those who did not, what was the rationale for not wanting it?

A: That is a matter of the mystic's role in society. Moses, it is said, wanted to die, to leave the world, to remain in a state of union. But God said he had a role as a mystic - to reach the extreme and yet return. But that is not the case for all Kabbalists: not all of them were oriented toward society. There is also a controversy about the desirability of it, but the idea that it could be achieved was admitted on all sides of the controversy. It was not theologically denied. Even those who opposed it admitted that a total union was possible.

Q: In that case, how was Aqiva understood?

A: He was understood as someone who could balance, who could enter and leave. Aqiva (like Moses) could enter, but he knew when to retreat. He knew how to combine the two.

Q: On Tuesday you discussed the role of Halakhic ritual as a way of controlling impulses, for Maimonides. Tonight you did not mention it at all. Did it have a role?

A: Maimonides was a Halakhist. But most of the Kabbalists we have mentioned were not. Most were anonymous - they were not Halakhic masters, but mystics. For them, keeping the norms was not as important as reaching beyond the norms. Basically, they were a-nomian. They did not regard the Commandments as a major tool. They might be preparatory, but they were not final.

Q: Certainly not all aspects of Halakha would have been neutral: it afforded major opportunities for ecstatic experiences on certain feasts, for example...

A: These Kabbalists were not unobservant, they were not antinomian. But as mystics (rather than as Jews) they used other types of

rituals or techniques. Ritual anyway would be suspended at the peaks of ecstatic experience, when one cannot do anything. The issue is not simple - but there seems to have been no friction. It is highly significant that there are no critiques of the use of mystical techniques, e.g., of combining Divine Names. Their practice probably did not interfere with regular Halakhic observances.

Q: How did such experiences tend to affect their experience of the material world? Did it enhance their opinion of it? Lower it?

A: Here we touch on the paradoxical connection of the mystic and the prophetic mission. As ecstasies, they were escapist. But they also felt that the experience prompted or provoked a mission. In coming back, the return was interpreted as a being sent forth, as having a mission. This offered a rationale for coming back. "You are permitted to return if you are needed." Thus there was a tension between the drive for attainment and the feeling of a mission.

Q: What about free will? Could one say that Ben Azzai got what he wanted, and that Aqiva got what he wanted?

A: Not exactly. At a moment in an experience one may be caught up or captured by another dynamic. You may lose control; free will may be overwhelmed, overridden.

Q: Is there an attempt to revive these things in Israel?

A: Yes; some are studying and practising these techniques.

Q: For example?

A: Breathing, letter combination - I have contacted at least ten people I know.

Q: They base this on Kabbalistic descriptions?

A: They ARE Kabbalists.

Q: In this Kabbalistic context God is described as radiance, energy, but in basic Judaism God is also anthropomorphic, interested in the world. Is there a connection?

A: If one is speaking about erotic experience, there must be some sense of a personalistic object. The Kabbalists tried to compromise between anthropomorphic and spiritualistic content. The Sefiroth were seen as a structure of Light, but also as corporeal. They were able to shape the anthropomorphic content to a more spiritual, energetic model.

[Afterward, as is usual at such lectures, people approached the speaker with congratulations, comments, and assorted questions. Two stand out.]

[A thin, intense young man kept asking Idel about energy experiences, and the sense of "energy coming in," and asked if anyone had done any EEG studies of Kabbalists. Idel said that Judaic studies were still in their infancy; mostly they were textual studies, an attempt to figure out what the texts actually said and what they were about - and even just to find them and get them edited and printed. No one had gotten to doing anything else, though he knew of the work by Ornstein and others, and thought it would be interesting to do in a Kabbalistic context.

[The young man, consumed by his questioning, didn't quite see Idel's point about the emphasis on textual scholarship; Idel gradually realized the young man wanted advice about his own meditational experiences, and was a little taken aback, and tried to achieve polite closure.

[Idel turned to another questioner, who asked something textual:

Q: You mentioned that these techniques became discussed and elaborated in the Thirteenth Century or so. Is there any textual evidence for their source?

A: Yes; in fact some of them can be found in texts of the Hellenistic period, especially those involving breathing and letter combination and visualization. They seem to be a part of a general fund of such techniques at the time, parallel to similar things one finds in Hellenistic magical papyri, for example.

[Then, as though realizing then that the young man's questions {about what it meant when energy came in, as opposed to finding oneself elsewhere, about the dangers of possession, and so on} were pressing, Idel turned back {despite attempts by various professors to ease him out of the hall} and began quietly to address himself to his queries.]

[end of part II]