

MOSHE IDEL

Infinites of Torah in Kabbalah

The purpose of this paper is to describe different kinds of infinities which were attributed to the Torah by early kabbalists. The emergence of these conceptions was the result of a crystallization of earlier mystical motifs, which are presented here as mainly non-rabbinic tendencies. In the kabbalistic writings we discover that the midrashic view-in which the distances between God, the interpreter, and the Torah are scrupulously preserved-has been exchanged for a view in which the infinities of the Torah are seen as coexisting with a virtual closure of the gaps between God, interpreter, and Torah.

The nature of midrashic interpretation is determined by two main components of the interpretative experience: the text and the interpreter. The text is the canonized Hebrew Bible whose precise borders are delimited and whose sacrosanct status is sealed.¹ The situation of the interpreter is altogether different. As the text became fixed, the terms of his task altered. The Divine Spirit which was instrumental in the formation of the canon was excluded from the interpretative process.² The rabbinic interpreter, no more than a simple human being before divine revelation, had now to function without the divine help so necessary to fathoming the messages inherent in the text. In penetrating the intricacies of the Bible, he had only two tools: the first was the tradition and the second his own intellectual abilities and capacity to apply the authorized rules of interpretation. The Godhead now expected that man, on his own, would articulate His intentions as instilled for eternity in the revealed book.

Man faced, then, a silent Godhead and a text which was for centuries the single source of divine guidance. No wonder that close scrutiny of the Bible, motivated by and combined with an overwhelming conviction that everything is hinted at or solved by the biblical verses, became the main intellectual activity of Jewish spiritual leadership. The whole of its literary output in the Tannaitic and Amoraic periods was aimed at elucidating the legal part of the Bible and explaining its narrative portions. The authoritative rabbinic Jewish texts were regarded as but pleiades of stars rotating around the Bible, while the other kinds of texts (apocalyptic, magical, mystical, or mere belles lettres) were successfully excluded from the rabbinic universe and condemned to total oblivion. The remnants of the non-rabbinic Jewish literary creations that did survive became planets in Christian literatures; only seldom did they penetrate the rabbinic firmaments. Other texts were simply suppressed, though they continued to be esoterically transmitted among select groups. Such was the case with various types of mystical treatise (the greatest of these coming to comprise the so-called *Heikhalot* literature) as well as with certain magical texts which remained in usage in more popular circles.

This "purification" of Jewish literature contributed to the emergence of the relatively

uniform attitude toward the biblical text. But the apocalyptic, magical, mythical, and mystical perceptions of this text, which, naturally, could not be totally eradicated, continued to survive as vague hints or fragments incorporated into classical rabbinic literature. This literature, which was intended as a vast interpretation of the canon for the large Jewish public, was consumed by a community who sought in it the guidance and instruction which it was once the role of the prophet or priest to supply.

I shall now delve briefly into the ~ components of the midrashic experience. Its disseminators were leading figures in Jewish communities or academies who delivered their homilies before an open audience, without any restrictions regarding the age or the competence of the participants. The language of their discourses was generally perspicuous and aimed at explaining relatively simple items related to the biblical texts. Such explanation was usually achieved without resort to complex theological concepts. Further, these homilies took the form, it seems, of primarily oral speeches, delivered as part of the oral religious service. The language of these homilies, I should like to emphasize, served a highly social function, its central feature being its public or collective communication. Indeed, there is a strong affinity that links the ancient Jewish interpreter, using authorized hermeneutic devices

and perceiving the text as mainly speaking to the Jewish community, and the plain, public language he used in order to deliver his message.

In effect, one implies the other.

As long as Jewish culture was given the chance to develop more or less autonomously, it generated mostly self-interpretative literature of this type. However, when attacked either by sectarians, like the Karaites, or by outsiders, like the Islamic theologians, the tradition reacted by absorbing the theological positions of its opponents, trying thereby to evidence the complete compatibility of Jewish texts with the intellectual standards of other traditions, such as Islamic Kalam or Aristotelianism. One of the heaviest prices of this apologetic reinterpretation of Judaism was the further suppression of apocalyptic, magical, mythical, and mystical elements which, as I have already suggested, survived in a diluted fashion in rabbinic sources, or in their primary form in Hebrew texts existing outside the authoritative Jewish literature. But just as the purification of Jewish literature caused a relocation of the mysterious, mystical, or magical elements in midrash, so the rationalistic reconstructions of Judaism prompted, in turn, a powerful reaction wherein an amalgam of older traditions, including the same mystical, mythical, and magical elements, came to the surface in more overt and more crystallized forms.³

The beginnings of kabbalah offer evidence of this reaction. The emergence of this literature was not only a decisive development for Jewish theology; it also had the utmost influence on the subsequent unfolding of Jewish hermeneutics. Underground myths and symbols surfaced in plain view and hermeneutic methods which were rarely used by rabbinic authorities, as well as entirely new perceptions about the biblical text, came to the forefront.⁴ With this theological shift came also powerful new exegetical devices which enabled Jewish mystics to revolutionize conventional understanding of the biblical message. I should like to describe the nature of some of these "re-newed" or,

better, really new hermeneutics.

Under the impact of ancient magic and mysticism, kabbalah was able to generate a relatively unique theory of language that applied to the Bible and its interpretation. The Hebrew language was no longer considered the exclusive instrument of divine revelation of sacred history and the Jewish *modus vivendi*. It was conceived rather as a powerful tool which, used by God in order to create the world, could also be used by the kabbalist masters in imitation of God, in their own

marvelous creations,⁵ or in the achievement of mystical experiences or sometimes even of unio mystica.⁶

Another decisive change in medieval Jewish hermeneutics was the ascent of a far-reaching assumption, expressed almost exclusively in kabbalistic texts,⁷ regarding the nature of the interpreter. As already mentioned, the Divine Spirit was categorically excluded from the interpretative process as that process was viewed by the rabbis.⁸ Ecstatic states, prophetic inspirations, angelic revelations, or oneiric messages were unacceptable as exegetical techniques or reliable testimonies. It is true that such experiences never ceased to attract some rabbinic masters, and accounts of sporadic occurrences of altered states of consciousness in connection with particularly knotty interpretative quandaries certainly exist. Nevertheless, it was the kabbalists alone who went so far as to condition the attainment of the sublime secrets of Torah on paranormal spiritual experiences. In certain kabbalistic commentaries on the Bible we find indications that a prophetic state of mind is believed necessary to the proper decoding of the Bible. And in a more general way the kabbalists' reaching for a transcendent interpretative dimension even assumed categorical significance. Indeed, we come now to an issue of central importance in kabbalistic interpretation. This is the direct relationship between the notion of the transported interpreter and the growing perception of the Torah as infinity. The kabbalistic blurring of the distinction between God and man⁹ in prophetic experiences is coextensive, I believe, with the blurring of the difference between infinite God and infinite Torah.

In the rabbinic sources the Torah is, of course, given a unique status, unparalleled by all but the Divine Throne. The Torah predates the creation of the world. It is considered God's daughter and its way is the single way to contemplate the Godhead, and so on. However, whereas in the non-mystical texts there is a clear reticence to identify Torah with God Himself, there is a tendency in the Heikhalot literature to conceive Torah as inscribed on God's "limbs," thereby minimizing the difference between it and God. The rabbinic opinion, that Torah is not to be found in heaven since it was delivered to Moses in its entirety and is thus completely, finitely, in our possession, seems to be rejected by earlier Jewish mystical groups. Nevertheless, it fell to the kabbalists to take the decisive step toward the explicit identification of Torah with God.

To suggest how this was done, I turn to two intriguing descriptions of the Torah. The first occurs in a long-forgotten kabbalistic work, entitled *The Book of [Divine] Unity*:

All the letters of the Torah, by their shapes, combined and separated, swaddled letters, curved ones and crooked ones, superfluous and elliptic ones, minute and large ones, and inverted, the calligraphy of the letters, the open and closed pericopes and the ordered ones, all of them are the shape of God, Blessed be He. It is similar to, though incomparable with, the thing someone paints using [several] kinds of colors, likewise the Torah, beginning with the first pericope until the last one is the shape of God, the Great and Formidable, Blessed be He, since if one letter be missing from the Scroll of Torah, or one is superfluous, or a [closed] pericope was [written] in an open fashion or an [open] pericope was [written] in a closed fashion, that Scroll of Torah is disqualified, since it has not in itself the shape of God, the Great and Formidable, because of the change the shape caused.¹⁰

According to this passage, the exact form of the authorized writing of the Bible is equivalent to the shape of God. The Bible, therefore, in its ideal form, constitutes an absolute book, including in it the supreme revelation of God, which is offered anthropomorphically and symbolically, limb by divine limb, within the whole text.

Even more striking is another description of this formal aspect of the Torah by a certain R. Isaac, apparently a late thirteenth or early fourteenth-century kabbalist:¹¹ "The form of the written Torah is that of the colors of white fire, and the form of the oral Torah has the colored forms of black fire."¹² This text implies, as Scholem has emphasized, that the real "written Torah" consists in the white background enveloping the black letters which, paradoxically enough, are said to form the "oral Torah." The superiority of the white medium, its existence as an element in itself,¹³ recalls the view of white and black that Stéphane Mallarmé offers in "*Le Livre*," where metaphysical status is attributed to the

white space.¹⁴

II

Aside from these two kinds of contrasting identification of Torah with God or Divine Manifestations, kabbalah views the Bible as encompassing an infinity of significances.¹⁵ The Bible therefore is regarded by kabbalists as being akin to, and in several texts identical with, aspects of Godhead itself. I should now like to survey four significant kinds of infinity of the Torah¹⁶ which are, in my opinion, consonant with various modern literary theories of writing, reading, and/or interpretation.

Indeed, some of the kabbalistic views of Torah discussed below were known to Christian theologians and could, at least theoretically, have influenced the subsequent unfolding of European culture. One of them, as we shall note, is explicitly cited by Jacques Derrida.

A. The nature of the Hebrew language, in which the consonants can be written with the vowels as well as without them, is the starting point of an important remark by one of the first kabbalists. According to R. Jacob ben Sheshet (middle thirteenth century),

it is a well-known thing, that each and every word of the Torah, will change [i.e., its significance] in accordance with the change of its vocalization, though its consonants will not be changed ... and see: its significance changed ... the word [i.e., the consonants constituting it] will not change its order. Likewise, we may state that the Tetragrammaton will be used [during the prayer] with [kabbalistic] intentions, in accordance with its vocalization; if someone who knows how to construct its construction will direct [his attention] to the construction which that [peculiar] vocalization points out, his prayer will be heard, and his request will be announced by God.¹⁷

The Torah scroll, written without vowels, is therefore pregnant with a variety of vocalizations, all of them possible without any change in the canonical form of the sacred text.¹⁸ The fluctuation of the vocalization, as it causes shifts in the meaning of a given combination of the consonants, also alters the meaning of the sentence and of the Torah itself. Interestingly enough, the kabbalist indicates that this process is his own discovery, or one that stems directly from the Sinaitic revelation itself.¹⁹

A long line of kabbalists copied this text and expanded upon it. I should like to cite and analyze only two of them, wherein the implications inherent in R. Jacob ben Sheshet's observation are framed more explicitly. An anonymous kabbalist, writing, we believe, at the end of the thirteenth century, asserts:

Since the vowel [system] is the form of, and as soul to, the consonants, the scroll of Torah is written without vowels, since it [the scroll] includes all the facets [i.e., aspects] and all the profound senses, and all of them interpreted in relation to each and every letter, one facet out of other facets, one secret out of other secrets, and there is no limit known to us and we said: *Uob* 28:14j "The depth said, It is not in me." And if we should vocalize the scroll of Torah, it would receive a limit and measure, like the hyle that receives a peculiar form, and it [the scroll] would not be interpreted but according to the specific vocalization of a certain word.²⁰

Freedom of interpretation is presented here not as sheer accident, arising from the special nature of the Hebrew language; rather, this

freedom is implied, according to the kabbalist, in the very prohibition to vocalize the scroll of Torah, a prohibition which permits an unlimited range of possible understandings. The biblical text, in this view, is the touchstone of man's capacities. Its potential infinity, however, is not wholly dependent upon our capacity to actualize it. It is inherent in the peculiar structure of the biblical text itself. All perfections are encompassed by the Torah, as each and every word of the Torah is pregnant with an immensity of meanings.²¹

Another formulation of this mystical explanation of the non-vocalized form of the Torah should be noted here since it serves as a conduit between Jewish kabbalah and Christian culture. According to R. Menabem Recanati (early fourteenth century) in his Commentary on the Torah, "it is well-known that the consonants have many aspects when unvocalized. However, when they are vocalized they have only one significance, in accordance with the vocalization, and therefore

the scroll of Torah, which has all the aspects, is unvocalized."22 Recanati's Commentary was translated into Latin by Flavius Mithridates for the use of Pico della Mirandola.²³ The translation is apparently lost, but its impact is registered in one of Pico's Kabbalistic Theses: "Per modum legendi sine puncti in lege, et modus scribendi res divinas ... nobis ostenditur."24

I will conclude my brief survey of this aspect of the infinity of Torah with one more point. Despite the fact that these kabbalists maintain the traditional order or morphé of the Torah, they still conceived its meaning as amorphous, allowing each and every interpreter an opportunity to display the range of his exegetical capacities.

B. Another expression of the infinity of Torah overtly connects it to God's infinity in His infinite Wisdom.²⁵ According to R. Moshe de Leon, God

has bequeathed to Israel, this holy Torah from above in order to bequeath to them the secret of this name and in order to [enable Israel to] cleave to Him [or to His name] ... in order to evince that as this name [or He] is infinite and limitless, so is this Torah infinite and limitless ... since the Torah being longer than the earth and broader than the sea [cf. Job 11:9], we must be spiritually aware and know that the essence of this existence is infinite and limitless.²⁶

Thus, not only does the infinity of the Torah reflect God's infinity, but apprehension of this infinity offers now a way to cleave to Him. How precisely this happens, we do not know. However, from a different starting point, we observe another kabbalist reach a similar conclusion:

"Since God has neither beginning nor end, no limit at all, so also His Perfect Torah, which was transmitted to us has, from our perspective, neither limit nor end and David therefore said (Ps. 119:96)27 I have seen an end of all perfection, but thy commandment is exceeding broad."28

This kabbalist learns about the infinite Torah through God's infinity. Another kabbalist, a contemporary of the authors quoted above, specifically identifies Torah with God's infinite wisdom. Treating God's "unchangeability," R. David ben Abraham ha-Lavan maintains that as all measure is a result of boundaries or limits, so is the wisdom of a man limited by the peculiar science he knows; and yet "the science which has no measure [i.e., is infinite] has no measure for its power; this is why the Torah has no limit since its power has no measure, because it is the Primordial Wisdom the Wisdom has no limit since this Wisdom²⁹ and His Essence are one entity."30 Here, the essential identity between God and Torah is quite explicit.

C. Torah is infinite, again, because the number of the combinations of its letters-according to the complex kabbalistic techniques of permutations-is infinite.³¹ These techniques of combination, developed in works written under the impact of prophetic kabbalah,³² are described by R. Joseph Gikatilla, a student of R. Abraham Abulafia:

By the mixture of these six letters [the consonants of the word Bereshit³³] with each other, and the profound understanding of their permutation and combination, the prophets and visionaries penetrated the mysteries of the Torah,

andno one is capable of comprehending the end of these things, but God

aloneit is incumbent on man to meditate upon the structures of the Torah,

which depend upon the Wisdom of God and no one is able to understand] one [parcel] of the thousands of thousands of immense [secrets] which depend upon the part of one letter³⁴ of the letters of the Torah.³⁵

The "ars combinatoria" is perceived here as the path toward the partial comprehension of the secrets of the Torah. Its affinity to Abulafia's sixth path of interpretation of Torah is clear.³⁶ Still, we can discern here two different, though possibly complementary, views of infinity. The first is a mathematical infinity resulting from the application of complicated exegetical methods to letters of Torah and from the attempt to understand the significance of each combination. However, the monadic infinity inherent in each and every letter adds a further dimension to the mathematical infinity. The former is achieved by the destruction³⁷ of the order of the letters of the Torah by the combinatory process.³⁸ The latter, however, is quite independent of such permuta-

tions and, indeed, meditation upon the infinite significances depending on each letter is recommended when the "structures" of the Torah-ostensibly including also the order of the letters-remain unchanged. Yet the very concentration upon one separate letter is said to have a destructive effect upon the plain meaning of the text (or of the sentence) as a whole. Gikatilla seems to have combined Abulafia's two last paths of interpretation of the Torah into one way. Permutation and monadization both lead away from the significant text toward an incommunicable or asocial perception achieved in a paranormal state of consciousness. The monadization is instrumental, according to Abulafia, in bringing on the kabbalist's *unio mystica*. The path of permutations, the sixth one, is intended for those who attempt the *imitatio intellectus agentis*, persons who practice solitary concentration-exercises and are presumed to invent novel "forms," namely, meanings, for the combinations of letters. 39

This effort of imitation of the *Intellectus Agens* is apparently a transition from a limited state of consciousness to a larger one.⁴⁰ Interestingly enough, according to Abulafia each higher path of interpretation is described as a larger sphere or circle;⁴¹ the expansion of the intellect is therefore tantamount to the use of ever more complicated hermeneutic methods bent on achieving increasingly comprehensive understandings of the Torah.⁴²

Indeed, Abulafia is interested here in transcending the natural understanding of reality which was closely connected, in medieval philosophy, with Aristotle's logic. While Aristotelian logic is based upon coherent sentences which generate conclusions significant in the natural world, kabbalah-specifically prophetic kabbalah-has a special logic which is the only suitable exegesis to the biblical text. To decipher the message of Torah, kabbalah relies upon what it calls an "inner higher logic" which employs separate letters in lieu of concepts, as well as the combination of these letters. This method is deemed superior to Greek logic inasmuch as it returns the text to its original state, when it was but a continuum of letters all viewed as names of God.⁴³

In this context it is worth noting that Derrida has combined Abulafia's view of logic with Stephane Mallarme's definition of the role of poetry. In his *La Dissemination*, he writes, in reference to kabbalah: "La science de la combinaison des lettres est la science de la logique interieure superieure, elle coopere a une explication orphique de la terre."⁴⁴ We might also mention here that Umberto Eco refers to Lull-

lian techniques of combination of letters in describing Mallarme's method of combining pages.⁴⁵ As we have learned from Pico,⁴⁶ the kabbalistic "ars combinatoria" is closely related to Lull's practice. Not without interest, then, is the fact that in Pico's *Theses*⁴⁷ orphic issues were compared to and connected with kabbalistic discussions, particularly those of Abulafia's school.

Thus the concept of infinity of meaning transforms the Torah from a socially motivated document into an instrument employed by mystics for the sake of their own self-perfection. Moreover, the Torah is perceived by certain kabbalists as a divine and cosmic entity, variously interpreted in the infinite series of universes. According to Gikatilla,

The scroll [i.e., the Torah] is not vocalized and has neither cantillation-notes, nor [indication where] the verse ends; since the scroll of Torah includes all the sciences, the exoteric and esoteric ones, [it] is interpreted in several ways, since man turns the verse up and down,⁴⁸ and therefore our sages said:⁴⁹ "Are not my words like as a fire? Saith the Lord" (Jeremiah 23:29) like the forms of the flame of fire that has neither a peculiar measure nor peculiar form, so so the scroll of Torah has no peculiar form for [its] verses, but sometimes it [the verse] is interpreted so and sometimes it is interpreted otherwise, namely in the world of the angels it is read [as referring to] one issue and in the world of the spheres it is read [as referring to] another issue and in the lower world it is read [as referring to] another issue, and so in the thousands and thousands of worlds which are included in these three worlds, each one according to its capacity and comprehension,⁵⁰ is his reading [i.e., interpretation] of the Torah.⁵²

Therefore, in Gikatilla's view, there is also another infinity: that stemming from the

fluctuation of the vocalizations. It is interesting, though not surprising, that the view of Torah as an entity read or deciphered differently on the different levels of reality, found its way into Christian thought. According to Emmanuel Swedenborg,

The whole sacred scripture teaches that there is a God, because in its inmost content there is nothing but God, that is, the divine which proceeds from time; for it was dictated by God, and nothing can go forth from God, but what is Himself, and is divine. The sacred scripture is this in its inmost content. But in its derivatives, which proceed from the inmost content but are on a lower plane, the sacred scripture is accommodated to the perceptions of angels and men. In these also it is divine, but in another form, in which it is called the divine celestial, spiritual, and natural, which is the inmost and is clothed with such things as are accommodated to the perception of angels and men, shines forth like light through crystals, but with variety according to the state of mind which a man has acquired, either from God or from himself.⁵³

It is not unlikely that the similarity between this Christian visionary's perception of the sacred scripture and the kabbalistic one is the result of the influence of Jewish texts.⁵⁴

D. Last but not least, another facet of infinite meanings of Torah is expressed in kabbalistic symbolism. ⁵⁵ According to some important kabbalists,⁵⁶ an infra-divine dynamic is reflected by biblical verses, wherein each word serves as a symbol for a divine manifestation⁵⁷ or sefirah.⁵⁸ The relationship between a given word and its supernal counterpart is relatively stable in earlier kabbalah. Toward the end of the thirteenth century, however, greater fluctuation in this relationship is perceptible. In the very same treatise a word may symbolize more than one sefirah. The theoretical possibility thus emerges of decoding the same verse in several symbolic directions. Indeed this possibility is fully exploited in the central mystical work of kabbalah, the Zohar.⁵⁹ Therefore, the supernal dynamic is reflected not only in a symbolic rendering of the theosophic content of a particular verse, but also by the very fact that the same verse can be interpreted again and again, all interpretations bearing equal authority. According to this perception, discovery of new significances in the biblical text is yet another way of testifying to the infinite workings of the sefirotic world.

The kabbalistic transformation of words and whole sentences into symbols has a deep impact on the perception of language itself. For even as the individual word retains its original forms, even as its place in the sentence or its grammatical function remain stable, its status as a lower projection of an aspect of the Godhead renders it an absolute entity. The result is a mystical linguistics forged into a skeletal grammar. Rather than being understood as mundane and conventional units of communication or representation, the words of the Bible, grasped as moments of God's enacted autobiography, become instruments for His self-revelation in being.

The primary unit then remains the word which, in contrast to Abulafia's text-destructing exegesis which annihilates the "interpreted" material in order to reconstruct it in a new way, is viewed as a monadic symbol.⁶⁰

To summarize: all of the important components of the interpretative triangle undergo decisive transformation in kabbalistic hermeneutics. The kabbalistic interpreter is interested in the subtleties of Divine Life. He decodes the Bible as a mystical biography of the infradivine infinite processes and of the regulations which influence the function of these processes, rather than as a humanly directed docu-

ment. Or, as in the prophetic kabbalah, he views the highest interpretation of the Torah as the actualization of its infinite mathematical potentialities as they may assist in the expansion of the interpreter's consciousness of the Godhead. Therefore, Torah is either pushed in the direction of revealed Divinity and sometimes even identified with It; or, attracted in the opposite direction, Torah becomes an instrument by which is achieved the union of man's intellect with God. The status of the Torah as an independent entity—such as we find in the talmudic-midrashic literature—standing between man and God and separated from both, vanishes.

likewise, in kabbalah man's separate identity or self is jeopardized.

The divine source of his soul, according to the sefirotic kabbalah, or of his intellect, according to the prophetic brand, endows him with a spiritual affinity to the Godhead. This affinity authorizes, as it facilitates, the emergence of a pneumatic exegesis to be defined against talmudic-midrashic philologically oriented hermeneutics. The text becomes a pretext for innovating far-reaching ideas which are projected onto the biblical verses. The hermeneutic methods whereby these innovations are injected into the text differ considerably from the talmudic-midrashic rules of interpretation. Combinations of letters, gematria, and symbolistic exegesis are wholly indeterminate and superflexible techniques. Hence they are liable to produce radically heterogeneous results. The looseness of these hermeneutic methods is counterbalanced solely by doctrinal inhibitions. When these inhibitions disappear or are replaced by others, the Christian kabbalist, using highly similar kabbalistic hermeneutics, can easily conclude that kabbalah adumbrates Christian tenets.⁶¹

The kabbalistic perception of the Torah, as an absolute book which is both identical with and descending from Divinity, supplies a point of departure from which the pneumatic exegete is able to discover its infinite significance. Torah is viewed as an "opera aperta" par excellence, wherein the divine character of man finds its perfect expression even as it discovers God's infinity reflected in the amorphous text. To put it another way: the Torah is a divine chef d'oeuvre, while kabbalistic exegesis, and kabbalah in general, is the unfolding of both Torah's infinite subtleties and (paradoxically, to some extent) the kabbalist's inner qualities.⁶² The innovative techniques of kabbalistic interpretation are part of a profound transformation that goes on at the heart of Judaism, culminating in what Jacques Riviere calls "a kind of assault on the absolute"⁶³ which changes the Jewish view of man as well as its view of language. Like many phenomena in modern literature, kabbalah is an attempt to transmute reality through the power of words.⁶⁴ Both activities are part of "a vast incantation towards the miracle."⁶⁵

NOTES

1. We may fairly apply Roland Barthes's description of the affinity between the language classique and nature to the attitude of midrashic interpreters toward the Bible: "Que signifie en effet l'economie rationnelle du langage classique sinon que la Nature est pleine, possedable, sans fuite et sans ombre, tout entiere soumise aux rets de la parole?" *Le degre zero de l'ecriture* (Paris: Editions Gonthier, 1964), pp. 45-47. Midrashic language may well be viewed as a language classique, whereas the kabbalistic language accords in principle with Barthes's description of language poetique.

2. See Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Prophecy and Canon* (London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), pp. 132-38.

3. On this view of the emergence of kabbalah as a historical phenomenon see my "Beginning of Kabbalah," forthcoming in *The World History of the Jewish People* (Hebrew), ed. Joshua Prawer (Tel Aviv: Massada).

4. I should like to stress that for more than one reason kabbalistic hermeneutics follows earlier midrashic methods of exegesis: see, e.g., Joseph Dan's essay, "Midrash and the Dawn of Kabbalah," in this volume. I am interested in concentrating here, however, upon non-midrashic, and in my view even anti-midrashic, trends in kabbalistic hermeneutics, without denying the existence of "conservative" kabbalistic exegesis. On the split between "innovative" kabbalah, described herein, and "conservative" kabbalah, which in principle rejected the perceptions of Torah described, see M. Idel, "We Have No Kabbalistic Tradition on This," in Isadore Twersky, ed., *Rabbi Moses Nahmanides (Ramban): Explorations in His Religious and Literary Virtuosity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), pp. 63-73.

5. Cf. G. Scholem, "The Name of God and the Linguistic Theory of the Kabbalah," *Diogenes* 79 (1972), 59-80; 80 (1972), 164-94.

6. See M. Idel, "Abraham Abulafia and Unio Mystica," forthcoming in Isadore Twersky, ed., *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature*, vol. 3.

7. The single significant exception is R. Jehudah ben Moshe Romano, a fourteenth-century Italian writer, whose doctrine has recently been the subject of a series of studies by Joseph B. Sermoneta.

8. I have deliberately avoided any discussion of Qumranic exegesis, although the phenomenological affinity to the subject under discussion here is indeed interesting, because I cannot find any significant historical relationship between the inspired eschatological interpretation in Qumran and the late medieval examples analyzed here. It is worth remarking that rabbinic sources acknowledge that the study of the Torah may open the way for paranormal spiritual experiences: see M. Idel, "The Conception of the Torah in Heikhalot Literature and Kabbalah" (Hebrew), *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 1, (1981), 35-37.

9. There are significant pantheistic elements in kabbalah: see G. Scholem, *Kabbalah Oerusalem: Keter*, 1974), pp. 144-52. The pantheistic view is evident also in Abulafia's works. See Idel, "Abraham Abulafia," and Joseph ben Shelomo,

"Gershom Scholem's Study on Pantheism in Kabbalah" (Hebrew), in Gershom Scholem-on the Man and His Activity (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1983), pp. 17-31.

66.

10. Ms. Milano-Ambrosiana, 62 fol. 113v, printed and discussed in Idel, "Conception of the Torah," pp. 62-64; see also G. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), pp. 43-44.

11. Scholem, "Name of God," pp. 48-49, identifies the R. Isaac the Old, the author of the text, with R. Isaac Sagi-Nahor (the Blind), one of the founders of Provencal Kabbalah. However, this assertion is not proven: see M. Idel, "Kabbalistic Materials from the School of R. David Ben Yehudah he-Eliazar" (Hebrew), *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 2 (1982-83), 170, n.9.

67. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah*, p.49.

13. Ibid., pp. 49-50. On the significance of the encompassing white page and space in kabbalah see Idel, "Kabbalistic Materials," pp. 174-75, 182, 206-07; cf. also Jacques Derrida, *La Dissemination* (Paris: Editions de Seuil, 1972), pp. 283ff., 383-84.

68. Cf. Jacques Scherer, *Le "uvre" de Mallarmé* (Paris: Gallimard, 1979), pp. 49-53.

15. The rise of the notion that Torah has an infinite number of significances is a major development in kabbalistic thought of the last third of the thirteenth century. See Idel, "No Kabbalistic Tradition," p. 71.

16. On this issue see the important discussion of Scholem, *On the Kabbalah*, pp. 506-3, whose remarks deal in general with other facets of the subject.

17. See *The Book of Belief and Faith* (Hebrew), chap. 5. Cf. the edition of Ch. D. Chavel, *The Works of Nalunanides* (Hebrew), vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1964), p. 370.

18. Compare R. Jacob's view in another kabbalistic treatise: *The Book of Correct Answers* (Hebrew), ed. Georges Vajda (Jerusalem: Israel National Academy of Sciences, 1968), p. 107: "The scroll of the Torah may not be vocalized, in order to [enable us to] interpret each and every word according to every significance we can read [i.e., to apply a certain vocalization to the Word]."

19. The very mention of innovation in connection with this view, which will generate an important aspect of the infinite Torah, is highly significant and constitutes a decisive departure from the previous conservative kabbalistic view: see Idel, "No Kabbalistic Tradition," p. 68, n. 58.

20. This text is cited by Gershom Scholem, "The Authentic Commentary on Sefer Y~ of Nalrmanides" (Hebrew), *Kiryat Sefer* 6 (1930), 414. On the infinite Torah in another passage of this text (p.9) see below, n. 35.

69. Ibid., p. 44.

70. Jerusalem, 1961, fol. 40b.

23. See Chairn Wirszubski, *Flavius Mithridates-Senno de Passione Domini* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1963), p. 61.

24. Conclusio 70: "We are shown, by the way of reading the Law without vowels, the way divine issues are written." On this thesis see the comments of Wirszubski, *A Christian Kabbalist Reads the Law* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem, 1979), pp. 36-37.

25. On other identifications of Torah with the Sefirah .{iohkmah (Wisdom), without attention however to the notion of infinity, see Scholem, *On the Kabbalah*, pp. 41-42.

71. Cf. *Book of the Pomegranate* (Hebrew), Ms. Cambridge, Add. 1516 fol. 29r.

27. This verse is the classical locus probans in the discussion of the infinite Torah.

Compare: Gikatilla's text printed in Efraim Gottlieb, *Studies in the Kabbalah literature*, ed. J. Hacker (Tel Aviv, 1976), p. 153. 72. Printed in Scholem, "Commentary on Sefer Y~," p.410.

29. Compare to the view quoted by Henri de Lubac: "Mens divina liber grandis est," in *Exegese medieval: Les quatres sens de l'écriture* (Paris: Aubier, 1959), vol. I, pt. I, p.326; and Annemarie Schimmel, "Sufism and the Islamic Tradition," in *Mysticism and Religious Traditions*, ed. S. T. Katz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp.130-31. See also R. Moshe Cordovero, *Shiur Komah* (Jerusalem: Abuzat Israel, 1966), fol. 13v: "and the Torah is in the Wisdom, which is the wisdom of God, and as this Wisdom is infinite, so is our Torah-infinite." See also Gikatilla's passage quoted below, and R. Pinhas of Korez's view, adduced by Scholem, *On the Kabbalah*, pp.76-77.

30. *The Book of the Tradition of the Covenant* (Hebrew), ed. G. Scholem in *Kovq al YadMinora Manuscripta Hebraica* n.s. I, 11 (1936),35. On this work and its author see Scholem, "David ben Abraham ha-Iabhan-ein unbekannter jiidischer Mystiker," *Occident and Orient . . . Gaster Anniversary Volume*, ed. B. Schindler and A. Marmorstein (London: Taylor's Foreign Press, 1936), pp. 505-58.

31. See Scholem, "Name of God," p. 189, n.74. It is pertinent to remark that the kabbalistic view of the infinite potentialities of the Torah is significantly different from the midrashic conception that there are seventy facets of the Torah. On the seventy facets see Wilhelm Bacher, "Seventy-two modes of expositions," *JQR* 4 (1892), 509, Scholem, *On the Kabbalah*, pp. 62-63, Idel, "Kabbalistic Materials," p. 199. The figure 70 stands for the totality of the aspects of a certain limited phenomenon, as we discover by comparing phrases closely related to the phrase "seventy facets": "seventy languages," "seventy nations," "seventy angels," etc. Though pointing to a comprehensive conception of the meanings inherent in the biblical text, the phrase "seventy facets" did not even hint at an infinity of significances.

32. Though none of Abulafia's combinatory techniques was his own innovation and he explicitly refers to the earlier books in which they were introduced, he seems to be the first Spanish kabbalist who presents them as exegetical methods, rather than mere sporadic ad hoc usages.

73. "In the beginning."

34. Cf. R. Isaiah Horowitz, *The Two Tablets of the Covenant* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem, 1969), vol. 2, fol. 98r-v: "you shall

know and understand that even one letter has infinite permutations ... man can comprehend that this thing [i.e., combinatory practices] has no end, and all this is because the Torah is the reflection of the godhead which is infinite." Cf vol. 3, fol. 87r.

35. The Gate of Punctuation, printed in *The Cedars of Lebanon* (Hebrew) (Venice, 1601), fol. 39v-40r. Cf also R. Moshe Cordovero's view in *Pardes Rimmonim*, introduction to Gate 30, and Gate 8, chap. 4. Compare also to R. Abraham bar Hiyya's view that "every letter and every word in every section of the Torah has a deep root in wisdom and contains a mystery from among mysteries of (divine) understanding, the depths of which one cannot penetrate. God grant that we may know some little of his abundance." Cf Scholem, *On the Kabbalah*, p. 63.

36. See M. Idel, "Abraham Abulafia's Works and Doctrines" (Hebrew) (Ph.D. diss., Hebrew University, 1976), pp. 226-28.

37. No wonder that Abulafia's exegetical methods were sharply criticized by a representative of the rabbinic authority, R. Shelomo ben Abraham ibn Adret. Abulafia, as R. Shelomo remarked, interpreted in his peculiar way not only the Bible but also nonbiblical texts, such as Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*.

38. The transformation of the text into a heap of letters may have its restorative aspects. Cf the striking passage discussed by Scholem, *On the Kabbalah*, pp. 74-75, where the Torah is described as a chaotic series of letters before it received its present canonic form. Though the sources quoted by Scholem are relatively late eighteenth-century passages, the conception seems to be earlier, and probably stems from the circle of Abulafia or his disciples. Cf Johannes Reuchlin's version regarding the order of the letters of the Torah as "confusae ac inglomeratae" before Moshe arranged them: "De Arte Cabalistica," in: *Gregorius, Ars Cabalistica* (Basel, 1587), p. 705. See below, n. 55.

75.

76. Cf Idel, "Abulafia's Works," pp. 227-22.

40. Cf Abulafia's recurrent motif of unknotting the knots of the soul as part of the mystical progress, in *ibid.*, pp. 329-31.

41. Abulafia uses the term *Galsal* (circle or sphere) in order to refer to "path": *nativ*, i.e., way of interpretation. He starts with the smallest sphere and progresses toward the largest one. Compare Gregorius's interpretation of Ezekiel's *ofan* as referring to exegetical method, hinted at in Henri de Lubac, *L'Ecriture dans la tradition* (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1966), p. 276.

42. This is an interesting parallel to Origen's view: "extenditur anima nostra, quae prius fuerat contracta, ut possit cappare esse sapientia Dei" (we enlarge our soul, which was previously contracted, in order to be capable of receiving the Wisdom of God). See *Patrologia Latina*, vol. 25, fol. 627c and de Lubac, *L'Ecriture dans la tradition*, p. 22, 5.

43. See M. Idel, "On the History of the Interdiction against the Study of Kabbalah before the Age of Forty" (Hebrew) *AJS Review* 5 (1980), 17-18.

44. *La Dissemination* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1972), p. 382. Abulafia's text, discussed in detail in my study referred to in n. 43, reached Derrida through the French version of Scholem's *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*: see *Les grands courants de la mystique juive* (Paris: Payot, 1950), p. 390, n. 50, for the same statement made by Derrida. See also George Steiner, *After Babel* (New York-London, 1970), pp. 60-61.

45. See *Opera aperta*, chap. 1. An intriguing and important subject is the probable influence, briefly discussed here, of kabbalistic theories on the peculiar structure of Mallarmé's *Le livre*. Mallarmé seems to be aware of kabbalistic issues: see Thomas A. Williams, *Mallarmé and the Language of Mysticism* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1970), pp. 55-56.

77. See Pico della Mirandola, "Apologia," in *Opera Omnia* (1557), p. 180.

47. See Chaim Wirszubski, *Three Studies in Christian Kabbalah* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem, 1975), pp. 39-51.

48. In Hebrew *le-ma'alah u-lematah*: compare Reuchlin's text referred to in n. 38 above.

78. *Shabbat*, fol. 88v.

50. In Hebrew *gavvan* means commonly "nuances" and "colors" but also "appearance," "example," and "form."

51. There may be an echo here of the Proclean view that everything receives the qualities of the world in which it exists.

52. Printed in Gottlieb, *Studies in the Kabbalah*, p. 154. See also Scholem, "Name of God," pp. 179-80. A similar anonymous passage possibly authored by Gikatilla is extant in two manuscripts: Paris (BN) 839 fol. 4r-v; Jerusalem, National Library 8°, 488 fol. 45v. *The True Christian Religion* (London-New York, 1936), para. 6, pp. 6-7; cf. para. 212, p. 22, 8; and *Apocalypse Explained*, para. 1074.

54. On the influence of another kabbalistic view on Swedenborg see my paper, "The World of Angels in Human Form" (Hebrew), *Studies in Jewish Mysticism Presented to Isaiah Tishby* (Jerusalem, 1984), p. 66, n. 251, where I present evidence supporting the thesis that Swedenborg studied kabbalah at Uppsala University.

55. On the nature of kabbalistic symbols, see Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1967), pp. 27-22; Isaiah Tishby, *Paths of Faith and Heresy* (Hebrew) (Ramat Gan: Massada, 1964), pp. 11-22; and n. 65 below.

56. Although most kabbalists share the symbolic perception of Godhead and reality, this perception was not, as some scholars have maintained (see n. 62 below), universally accepted, as is evidenced, for example, in Abulafia's *Kabbalah*.

57. In contrast to Abulafia's view of the Torah as allegorically rendering the processes of human consciousness: cf Idel, "Abulafia's Works," pp. 239-40.

79. See Scholem, *Major Trends*, pp. 13-14.

59. On the Zoharic symbolism in particular see Isaiah Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem, 1957), vol. 1, pp. 144-61; and Daniel Ch. Matt, *Zohar-The Book of Enlightenment* (Paulist Press, 1983), pp. 32-38.

80. Compare Barthes's description of "Mot poétique," *Le degré zéro*, pp. 43-45.

61. See Chaim Wirszubski, *Three Studies in Christian Kabbalah* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem, 1975), pp. 23-27.

62. It is noteworthy that only those kabbalists who belong to what I call "innovative kabbalah" (see Idel, "No Kabbalistic

Tradition," pp.71-73), Le., R. Abraham Abulafia, R. Moshe de Leon, R. Joseph Gikatilla and partially also R. Bahya ben Asher, formulate the principles of kabbalistic hermeneutics. Moreover, there is a latent contradiction between kabbalah, perceived as a corpus of esoteric theurgical-theosophical lore, and the existence of a body of hermeneutic rules which taddy assumes that the details of the kabbalistic lore are not in the possession of the kabbalists who are presumed to apply those exegetical rules in order to reconstruct the kabbalistic system.

81. "La crise du concept de littérature," *Nouvelle Revue Française*, February 1, 1924.

64. See the view of Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (New York: New American Library, 1953), p. 150.

65. Cf. Riviere, *ibid.*