

MAJOR TRENDS IN
JEWISH MYSTICISM

GERSHOM SCHOLEM

Foreword by ROBERT ALTER



SCHOCKEN BOOKS NEW YORK

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Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism is based on the Hilda Stroom Lectures delivered by Professor Scholem at the Jewish Institute of Religion, New York.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Scholem, Gershom Gerhard, 1897-1982
Major trends in Jewish mysticism / by Gershom Scholem;
foreword by Robert Alter.

p. cm.

Previously published: New York : Schocken Books, 1961. With new foreword.
Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-8052-1042-3

1. Mysticism—Judaism. 2. Cabala—History. I. Title.

BM723.S35 1995

296.833—dc20 95-2182

CIP

Manufactured in the United States of America

First Schocken paperback edition published in 1961
Reprinted from the third revised edition

[195]19

TO THE MEMORY OF
WALTER BENJAMIN
(1892-1940)

*The friend of a lifetime whose genius united the insight
of the Metaphysician, the interpretative power of the Critic
and the erudition of the Scholar*

DIED AT PORT BOU (SPAIN)
ON HIS WAY INTO FREEDOM

First Lecture

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS
OF JEWISH MYSTICISM

1

It is the purpose of these lectures to describe and to analyse some of the major trends of Jewish mysticism. I cannot of course hope to deal comprehensively in a few hours with a subject so vast and at the same time so intricate as the whole sweep and whirl of the mystical stream, as it runs its course through the movements which are known to the history of Jewish religion under the names of Kabbalah and Hasidism. Probably all of you have heard something about these aspects of Jewish religion. Their significance has been a matter of much dispute among Jewish scholars. Opinion has changed several times; it has fluctuated between the extremes of hostile criticism and condemnation on the one hand, and enthusiastic praise and defense on the other. It has not, however, greatly advanced our knowledge of what may be called the real nature of mystical lore, nor has it enabled us to form an unbiased judgment as to the part this lore has played and continues to play in Jewish history, or as to its importance for a true understanding of Judaism.

It is only fair to add that the exposition of Jewish mysticism, or that part of it which has so far been publicly discussed, abounds in misunderstandings and consequent misrepresentations of the subject matter under discussion. The great Jewish scholars of the past century whose conception of Jewish history is still dominant in our days, men like Graetz, Zunz, Geiger, Luzzatto and Steinschneider, had little sympathy—to put it mildly—for the Kabbalah. At once strange and repellent, it epitomised everything that was opposed to their own ideas and to the outlook which they hoped to make predominant in modern Judaism. Darkly it stood in their path, the ally of forces and tendencies in whose rejection pride was taken by a Jewry which, in Steinschneider's words, regarded it as its chief task

to make a decent exit from the world. This fact may account for the negative opinions of these scholars regarding the function of mysticism in Jewish history. We are well aware that their attitude, so far from being that of the pure scholar, was rather that of the combatant actively grappling with a dangerous foe who is still full of strength and vitality; the foe in question being the Hasidic movement. Enmity can do a great deal. We should be thankful to those zealous early critics who, though their judgment and sense of values may have been affected and warped by their prejudices, nevertheless had their eyes open to see certain important factors with great distinctness. Often enough they were in the right, though not for the reasons they themselves gave. Truth to tell, the most astonishing thing in reading the works of these critics is their lack of adequate knowledge of the sources or the subjects on which in many cases they ventured to pass judgment.

It is not to the credit of Jewish scholarship that the works of the few writers who were really informed on the subject were never printed, and in some cases were not even recorded, since there was nobody to take an interest. Nor have we reason to be proud of the fact that the greater part of the ideas and views which show a real insight into the world of Kabbalism, closed as it was to the rationalism prevailing in the Judaism of the nineteenth century, were expressed by Christian scholars of a mystical bent, such as the Englishman Arthur Edward Waite¹ of our days and the German Franz Josef Molitor² a century ago. It is a pity that the fine philosophical intuition and natural grasp of such students lost their edge because they lacked all critical sense as to historical and philological data in this field, and therefore failed completely when they had to handle problems bearing on the facts.

The natural and obvious result of the antagonism of the great Jewish scholars was that, since the authorized guardians neglected this field, all manner of charlatans and dreamers came and treated it as their own property. From the brilliant misunderstandings and misrepresentations of Alphonse Louis Constant, who has won fame under the pseudonym of Eliphas Lévi, to the highly coloured humbug of Aleister Crowley and his followers, the most eccentric and fantastic statements have been produced purporting to be legitimate interpretations of Kabbalism. The time has come to reclaim this derelict area and to apply to it the strict standards of historical re-

search. It is this task which I have set myself, and in the following lectures I should like to give some idea of the conclusions to which I have come in trying to light up this dark ground.

I do not have to point out that what I am going to say can in the nature of things be no more than a brief outline of the main structure of mystical thought, as it reveals itself in some of the classics of Jewish mysticism—more often than not in an obscure guise which makes it none too easy for modern minds to penetrate into its meaning. Obviously it is impossible to give a summary of the subject without at the same time attempting to interpret its meaning. It is a dangerous task to summarize in a few chapters a religious movement covering many centuries. In trying to explain so intricate a matter as Kabbalism the historian, too, must heed Byron's query: "Who will then explain the explanation?" For the rest, selection and abbreviation themselves constitute a kind of commentary, and to a certain extent even an appreciation of the subject. In other words, what I am going to present is a critical appreciation involving a certain philosophical outlook, as applied to the life texture of Jewish history, which in its fundamentals I believe to be active and alive to this day.

2

Since Jewish mysticism is to be the subject of these lectures, the first question bound to come up is this: what is Jewish mysticism? What precisely is meant by this term? Is there such a thing, and if so, what distinguishes it from other kinds of mystical experience? In order to be able to give an answer to this question, if only an incomplete one, it will be necessary to recall what we know about mysticism in general. I do not propose to add anything essentially new to the immense literature which has sprung up around this question during the past half-century. Some of you may have read the brilliant books written on this subject by Evelyn Underhill and Dr. Rufus Jones. I merely propose to rescue what appears to me important for our purpose from the welter of conflicting historical and metaphysical arguments which have been advanced and discussed in the course of the past century.

It is a curious fact that although doubt hardly exists as to what constitutes the phenomena to which history and philosophy have given the name of mysticism, there are almost as many definitions

of the term as there are writers on the subject. Some of these definitions, it is true, appear to have served more to obscure the nature of the question than to clarify it. Some idea of the confusion engendered by these definitions can be gauged from the interesting catalogue of "Definitions of Mysticism and Mystical Theology" compiled by Dr. Inge as an appendix to his lectures on "Christian Mysticism."

A good starting-point for our investigation can be obtained by scrutinizing a few of these definitions which have won a certain authority. Dr. Rufus Jones, in his excellent "Studies in Mystical Religion" defines his subject as follows: "I shall use the word to express the type of religion which puts the emphasis on immediate awareness of relation with God, on direct and intimate consciousness of the Divine Presence. It is religion in its most acute, intense and living stage."⁴ Thomas Aquinas briefly defines mysticism as *cognitio dei experimentalis*,⁵ as the knowledge of God through experience. In using this term he leans heavily, like many mystics before and after him, on the words of the Psalmist (Psalm xxxiv, 9): "Oh taste and see that the Lord is good." It is this tasting and seeing, however spiritualized it may become, that the genuine mystic desires. His attitude is determined by the fundamental experience of the inner self which enters into immediate contact with God or the metaphysical Reality. What forms the essence of this experience, and how it is to be adequately described—that is the great riddle which the mystics themselves, no less than the historians, have tried to solve.

For it must be said that this act of personal experience, the systematic investigation and interpretation of which forms the task of all mystical speculation, is of a highly contradictory and even paradoxical nature. Certainly this is true of all attempts to describe it in words and perhaps, where there are no longer words, of the act itself. What kind of direct relation can there be between the Creator and His creature, between the finite and the infinite; and how can words express an experience for which there is no adequate simile in this finite world of man? Yet it would be wrong and superficial to conclude that the contradiction implied by the nature of mystical experience betokens an inherent absurdity. It will be wiser to assume, as we shall often have occasion to do in the course of these lectures, that the religious world of the mystic can be expressed in

terms applicable to rational knowledge only with the help of paradox. Among the psychologists G. Stratton, in his "Psychology of Religious Life" (1911), has laid particular stress on this essential conflict in religious life and thought, even in its non-mystical form. It is well known that the descriptions given by the mystics of their peculiar experiences and of the God whose presence they experience are full of paradoxes of every kind. It is not the least baffling of these paradoxes—to take an instance which is common to Jewish and Christian mystics—that God is frequently described as the mystical Nothing. I shall not try now to give an interpretation of this term, to which we shall have to return; I only want to stress the fact that the particular reality which the mystic sees or tastes is of a very unusual kind.

To the general history of religion this fundamental experience is known under the name of *unio mystica*, or mystical union with God. The term, however, has no particular significance. Numerous mystics, Jews as well as non-Jews, have by no means represented the essence of their ecstatic experience, the tremendous uprush and soaring of the soul to its highest plane, as a union with God. To take an instance, the earliest Jewish mystics who formed an organized fraternity in Talmudic times and later, describe their experience in terms derived from the diction characteristic of their age. They speak of the ascent of the soul to the Celestial Throne where it obtains an ecstatic view of the majesty of God and the secrets of His Realm. A great distance separates these old Jewish Gnostics from the Hasidic mystics one of whom said:⁶ "There are those who serve God with their human intellect, and others whose gaze is fixed on Nothing. . . . He who is granted this supreme experience loses the reality of his intellect, but when he returns from such contemplation to the intellect, he finds it full of divine and inflowing splendor." And yet it is the same experience which both are trying to express in different ways.

This leads us to a further consideration: it would be a mistake to assume that the whole of what we call mysticism is identical with that personal experience which is realized in the state of ecstasy or ecstatic meditation. Mysticism, as an historical phenomenon, comprises much more than this experience, which lies at its root. There is a danger in relying too much on purely speculative definitions of the term. The point I should like to make is this—that there is no

such thing as mysticism in the abstract, that is to say, a phenomenon or experience which has no particular relation to other religious phenomena. There is no mysticism as such, there is only the mysticism of a particular religious system, Christian, Islamic, Jewish mysticism and so on. That there remains a common characteristic it would be absurd to deny, and it is this element which is brought out in the comparative analysis of particular mystical experiences. But only in our days has the belief gained ground that there is such a thing as an abstract mystical religion. One reason for this widespread belief may be found in the pantheistic trend which, for the past century, has exercised a much greater influence on religious thought than ever before. Its influence can be traced in the manifold attempts to abandon the fixed forms of dogmatic and institutional religion in favour of some sort of universal religion. For the same reason the various historical aspects of religious mysticism are often treated as corrupted forms of an, as it were, chemically pure mysticism which is thought of as not bound to any particular religion. As it is our intention to treat of a certain definite kind of mysticism, namely Jewish, we should not dwell too much upon such abstractions. Moreover, as Evelyn Underhill has rightly pointed out, the prevailing conception of the mystic as a religious anarchist who owes no allegiance to his religion finds little support in fact. History rather shows that the great mystics were faithful adherents of the great religions.

Jewish mysticism, no less than its Greek or Christian counterparts, presents itself as a totality of concrete historical phenomena. Let us, therefore, pause to consider for a moment the conditions and circumstances under which mysticism arises in the historical development of religion and particularly in that of the great monotheistic systems. The definitions of the term *mysticism*, of which I have given a few instances, lead only too easily to the conclusion that all religion in the last resort is based on mysticism; a conclusion which, as we have seen, is drawn in so many words by Rufus Jones. For is not religion unthinkable without an "immediate awareness of relation with God"? That way lies an interminable dispute about words. The fact is that nobody seriously thinks of applying the term *mysticism* to the classic manifestations of the great religions. It would be absurd to call Moses, the man of God, a mystic, or to apply this term to the Prophets, on the strength of their immediate

religious experience. I, for one, do not intend to employ a terminology which obscures the very real differences that are recognized by all, and thereby makes it even more difficult to get at the root of the problem.

3

The point which I would like to make first of all is this: Mysticism is a definite stage in the historical development of religion and makes its appearance under certain well-defined conditions. It is connected with, and inseparable from, a certain stage of the religious consciousness. It is also incompatible with certain other stages which leave no room for mysticism in the sense in which the term is commonly understood.

The first stage represents the world as being full of gods whom man encounters at every step and whose presence can be experienced without recourse to ecstatic meditation. In other words, there is no room for mysticism as long as the abyss between Man and God has not become a fact of the inner consciousness. That, however, is the case only while the childhood of mankind, its mythical epoch, lasts. The immediate consciousness of the interrelation and interdependence of things, their essential unity which precedes duality and in fact knows nothing of it, the truly monistic universe of man's mythical age, all this is alien to the spirit of mysticism. At the same time it will become clear why certain elements of this monistic consciousness recur on another plane and in different guise in the mystical consciousness. In this first stage, Nature is the scene of man's relation to God.

The second period which knows no real mysticism is the creative epoch in which the emergence, the break-through of religion occurs. Religion's supreme function is to destroy the dream-harmony of Man, Universe and God, to isolate man from the other elements of the dream stage of his mythical and primitive consciousness. For in its classical form, religion signifies the creation of a vast abyss, conceived as absolute, between God, the infinite and transcendental Being, and Man, the finite creature. For this reason alone, the rise of institutional religion, which is also the classical stage in the history of religion, is more widely removed than any other period from mysticism and all it implies. Man becomes aware of a fundamental duality, of a vast gulf which can be crossed by nothing but the *voice*;

the voice of God, directing and law-giving in His revelation, and the voice of man in prayer. The great monotheistic religions live and unfold in the ever-present consciousness of this bipolarity, of the existence of an abyss which can never be bridged. To them the scene of religion is no longer Nature, but the moral and religious action of man and the community of men, whose interplay brings about history as, in a sense, the stage on which the drama of man's relation to God unfolds.

And only now that religion has received, in history, its classical expression in a certain communal way of living and believing, only now do we witness the phenomenon called mysticism; its rise coincides with what may be called the romantic period of religion. Mysticism does not deny or overlook the abyss; on the contrary, it begins by realizing its existence, but from there it proceeds to a quest for the secret that will close it in, the hidden path that will span it. It strives to piece together the fragments broken by the religious cataclysm, to bring back the old unity which religion has destroyed, but on a new plane, where the world of mythology and that of revelation meet in the soul of man. Thus the soul becomes its scene and the soul's path through the abysmal multiplicity of things to the experience of the Divine Reality, now conceived as the primordial unity of all things, becomes its main preoccupation. To a certain extent, therefore, mysticism signifies a revival of mythical thought, although the difference must not be overlooked between the unity which is there before there is duality, and the unity that has to be won back in a new upsurge of the religious consciousness.

Historically, this appearance of mystical tendencies is also connected with another factor. The religious consciousness is not exhausted with the emergence of the classic systems of institutional religion. Its creative power endures, although the formative effect of a given religion may be sufficiently great to encompass all genuine religious feeling within its orbit for a long period. During this period the values which such a religious system has set up retain their original meaning and their appeal to the feelings of the believers. However, even so new religious impulses may and do arise which threaten to conflict with the scale of values established by historical religion. Above all, what encourages the emergence of mysticism is a situation in which these new impulses do not break through the shell of the old religious system and create a new one, but tend to

remain confined within its borders. If and when such a situation arises, the longing for new religious values corresponding to the new religious experience finds its expression in a new interpretation of the old values which frequently acquire a much more profound and personal significance, although one which often differs entirely from the old and transforms their meaning. In this way Creation, Revelation and Redemption, to mention some of our most important religious conceptions, are given new and different meanings reflecting the characteristic feature of mystical experience, the direct contact between the individual and God.

Revelation, for instance, is to the mystic not only a definite historical occurrence which, at a given moment in history, puts an end to any further direct relation between mankind and God. With no thought of denying Revelation as a fact of history, the mystic still conceives the source of religious knowledge and experience which bursts forth from his own heart as being of equal importance for the conception of religious truth. In other words, instead of the one act of Revelation, there is a constant repetition of this act. This new Revelation, to himself or to his spiritual master, the mystic tries to link up with the sacred texts of the old; hence the new interpretation given to the canonical texts and sacred books of the great religions. To the mystic, the original act of Revelation to the community—the, as it were, public revelation of Mount Sinai, to take one instance—appears as something whose true meaning has yet to unfold itself; the secret revelation is to him the real and decisive one. And thus the substance of the canonical texts, like that of all other religious values, is melted down and given another form as it passes through the fiery stream of the mystical consciousness. It is hardly surprising that, hard as the mystic may try to remain within the confines of his religion, he often consciously or unconsciously approaches, or even transgresses, its limits.

It is not necessary for me to say anything further at this point about the reasons which have often transformed mystics into heretics. Such heresy does not always have to be fought with fire and sword by the religious community: it may even happen that its heretical nature is not understood and recognized. Particularly is this the case where the mystic succeeds in adapting himself to the 'orthodox' vocabulary and uses it as a wing or vehicle for his thoughts. As a matter of fact, this is what many Kabbalists have

done. While Christianity and Islam, which had at their disposal more extensive means of repression and the apparatus of the State, have frequently and drastically suppressed the more extreme forms of mystical movements, few analogous events are to be found in the history of Judaism. Nevertheless, in the lectures on Sabbatianism and Hasidism, we shall have occasion to note that instances of this kind are not entirely lacking.

4

We have seen that mystical religion seeks to transform the God whom it encounters in the peculiar religious consciousness of its own social environment from an object of dogmatic knowledge into a novel and living experience and intuition. In addition, it also seeks to interpret this experience in a new way. Its practical side, the realization of God and the doctrine of the Quest for God, are therefore frequently, particularly in the more developed forms of the mystical consciousness, connected with a certain ideology. This ideology, this theory of mysticism, is a theory both of the mystical cognition of God and His revelation, and of the path which leads to Him.

It should now be clear why the outward forms of mystical religion within the orbit of a given religion are to a large extent shaped by the positive content and values recognized and glorified in that religion. We cannot, therefore, expect the physiognomy of Jewish mysticism to be the same as that of Catholic mysticism, Anabaptism or Moslem Sufism. The particular aspects of Christian mysticism, which are connected with the person of the Saviour and mediator between God and man, the mystical interpretation of the Passion of Christ, which is repeated in the personal experience of the individual—all this is foreign to Judaism, and also to its mystics. Their ideas proceed from the concepts and values peculiar to Judaism, that is to say, above all from the belief in the Unity of God and the meaning of His revelation as laid down in the Torah, the sacred law.

Jewish mysticism in its various forms represents an attempt to interpret the religious values of Judaism in terms of mystical values. It concentrates upon the idea of the living God who manifests himself in the acts of Creation, Revelation and Redemption. Pushed to its extreme, the mystical meditation on this idea gives birth to

the conception of a sphere, a whole realm of divinity, which underlies the world of our sense-data and which is present and active in all that exists. This is the meaning of what the Kabbalists call the *world of the 'Sefiroth'*. I should like to explain this a little more fully.

The attributes of the living God are conceived differently and undergo a peculiar transformation when compared with the meaning given to them by the philosophers of Judaism. Among the latter, Maimonides, in his "Guide of the Perplexed", felt bound to ask: How is it possible to say of God that He is living? Does that not imply a limitation of the infinite Being? The words "God is living", he argues, can only mean that he is not dead, that is to say, that he is the opposite of all that is negative. He is the negation of negation. A quite different reply is given by the Kabbalist, for whom the distinction, nay the conflict, between the known and the unknown God has a significance denied to it by the philosophers of Judaism.

No creature can take aim at the unknown, the hidden God. In the last resort, every cognition of God is based on a form of relation between Him and His creature, i.e. on a manifestation of God in something else, and not on a relation between Him and Himself. It has been argued that the difference between the *deus absconditus*, God in Himself, and God in His appearance is unknown to Kabbalism.⁷ This seems to me a wrong interpretation of the facts. On the contrary, the dualism embedded in these two aspects of the one God, both of which are, theologically speaking, possible ways of aiming at the divinity, has deeply preoccupied the Jewish mystics. It has occasionally led them to use formulas whose implied challenge to the religious consciousness of monotheism was fully revealed only in the subsequent development of Kabbalism. As a rule, the Kabbalists were concerned to find a formula which should give as little offense as possible to the philosophers. For this reason the inherent contradiction between the two aspects of God is not always brought out as clearly as in the famous doctrine of an anonymous writer around 1300, according to whom God in Himself, as an absolute Being, and therefore by His very nature incapable of becoming the subject of a revelation to others, is not and cannot be meant in the documents of Revelation, in the canonical writings of the Bible, and in the rabbinical tradition.⁸ He is not the subject of these writings and therefore also has no documented name, since every word of

the sacred writings refers after all to some aspect of His manifestation on the side of Creation. It follows that while the living God, the God of religion of whom these writings bear witness, has innumerable names—which, according to the Kabbalists, belong to Him by His very nature and not as a result of human convention—the *deus absconditus*, the God who is hidden in His own self, can only be named in a metaphorical sense and with the help of words which, mystically speaking, are not real names at all. The favorite formulae of the early Spanish Kabbalists are speculative paraphrases like “Root of all Roots,” “Great Reality,” “Indifferent Unity,” and, above all, *En-Sof*. The latter designation reveals the impersonal character of this aspect of the hidden God from the standpoint of man as clearly as, and perhaps even more clearly than, the others. It signifies “the infinite” as such; not, as has been frequently suggested, “He who is infinite” but “that which is infinite.” Isaac the Blind (one of the first Kabbalists of distinguishable personality) calls the *deus absconditus* “that which is not conceivable by thinking”, not “He who is not etc.”³⁰ It is clear that with this postulate of an impersonal basic reality in God, which becomes a person—or appears as a person—only in the process of Creation and Revelation, Kabbalism abandons the personalistic basis of the Biblical conception of God. In this sense it is undeniable that the author of the above-mentioned mystical aphorism is right in holding that *En-Sof* (or what is meant by it) is not even mentioned in the Bible and the Talmud. In the following lectures we shall see how the main schools of Kabbalistic thought have dealt with this problem. It will not surprise us to find that speculation has run the whole gamut—from attempts to re-transform the impersonal *En-Sof* into the personal God of the Bible to the downright heretical doctrine of a genuine dualism between the hidden *En-Sof* and the personal Demiurge of Scripture. For the moment, however, we are more concerned with the second aspect of the Godhead which, being of decisive importance for real religion, formed the main subject of theosophical speculation in Kabbalism.

The mystic strives to assure himself of the living presence of God, the God of the Bible, the God who is good, wise, just and merciful and the embodiment of all other positive attributes. But at the same time he is unwilling to renounce the idea of the hidden God who remains eternally unknowable in the depths of His own Self,

or, to use the bold expression of the Kabbalists “in the depths of His nothingness.”³¹ This hidden God may be without special attributes—the living God of whom the Revelation speaks, with whom all religion is concerned, must have attributes, which on another plane represent also the mystic’s own scale of moral values: God is good, God is severe, God is merciful and just, etc. As we shall have occasion to see, the mystic does not even recoil before the inference that in a higher sense there is a root of evil even in God. The benevolence of God is to the mystic not simply the negation of evil, but a whole sphere of divine light, in which God manifests Himself under this particular aspect of benevolence to the contemplation of the Kabbalist.

These spheres, which are often described with the aid of mythical metaphors and provide the key for a kind of mystical topography of the Divine realm, are themselves nothing but stages in the revelation of God’s creative power. Every attribute represents a given stage, including the attribute of severity and stern judgment, which mystical speculation has connected with the source of evil in God. The mystic who sets out to grasp the meaning of God’s absolute unity is thus faced at the outset with an infinite complexity of heavenly spheres and stages which are described in the Kabbalistic texts. From the contemplation of these ‘Sefiroth’ he proceeds to the conception of God as the union and the root of all these contradictions. Generally speaking, the mystics do not seem to conceive of God as the absolute Being or absolute Becoming but as the union of both; much as the hidden God of whom nothing is known to us, and the living God of religious experience and revelation, are one and the same. Kabbalism in other words is not dualistic, although historically there exists a close connection between its way of thinking and that of the Gnostics, to whom the hidden God and the Creator are opposing principles. On the contrary, all the energy of ‘orthodox’ Kabbalistic speculation is bent to the task of escaping from dualistic consequences; otherwise they would not have been able to maintain themselves within the Jewish community.

I think it is possible to say that the mystical interpretation of the attributes and the unity of God, in the so-called doctrine of the ‘Sefiroth’, constituted a problem common to all Kabbalists, while the solutions given to it by and in the various schools often differ from one another. In the same way, all Jewish mystics, from the

Therapeutae, whose doctrine was described by Philo of Alexandria,²² to the latest Hasid, are at one in giving a mystical interpretation to the Torah; the Torah is to them a living organism animated by a secret life which streams and pulsates below the crust of its literal meaning; every one of the innumerable strata of this hidden region corresponds to a new and profound meaning of the Torah. The Torah, in other words, does not consist merely of chapters, phrases and words; rather is it to be regarded as the living incarnation of the divine wisdom which eternally sends out new rays of light. It is not merely the historical law of the Chosen People, although it is that too; it is rather the cosmic law of the Universe, as God's wisdom conceived it. Each configuration of letters in it, whether it makes sense in human speech or not, symbolizes some aspect of God's creative power which is active in the universe. And just as the thoughts of God, in contrast to those of man, are of infinite profundity, so also no single interpretation of the Torah in human language is capable of taking in the whole of its meaning. It cannot be denied that this method of interpretation has proved almost barren for a plain understanding of the Holy Writ, but it is equally undeniable that viewed in this new light, the Sacred Books made a powerful appeal to the individual who discovered in their written words the secret of his life and of his God. It is the usual fate of sacred writings to become more or less divorced from the intentions of their authors. What may be called their after-life, those aspects which are discovered by later generations, frequently becomes of greater importance than their original meaning; and after all—who knows what their original meaning was?

5

Like all their spiritual kin among Christians or Moslems, the Jewish mystics cannot, of course, escape from the fact that the relation between mystical contemplation and the basic facts of human life and thought is highly paradoxical. But in the Kabbalah these paradoxes of the mystical mind frequently assume a peculiar form. Let us take as an instance their relation to the phenomenon of speech, one of the fundamental problems of mystical thought throughout the ages. How is it possible to give lingual expression to mystical knowledge, which by its very nature is related to a sphere

where speech and expression are excluded? How is it possible to paraphrase adequately in mere words the most intimate act of all, the contact of the individual with the Divine? And yet the urge of the mystics for self-expression is well known.

They continuously and bitterly complain of the utter inadequacy of words to express their true feelings, but, for all that, they glory in them; they indulge in rhetoric and never weary of trying to express the inexpressible in words. All writers on mysticism have laid stress on this point.²³ Jewish mysticism is no exception, yet it is distinguished by two unusual characteristics which may in some way be interrelated. What I have in mind is, first of all, the striking restraint observed by the Kabbalists in referring to the supreme experience; and secondly, their metaphysically positive attitude towards language as God's own instrument.

If you compare the writings of Jewish mystics with the mystical literature of other religions you will notice a considerable difference, a difference which has, to some extent, made difficult and even prevented the understanding of the deeper meaning of Kabbalism. Nothing could be farther from the truth than the assumption that the religious experience of the Kabbalists is barren of that which, as we have seen, forms the essence of mystical experience, everywhere and at all times. The ecstatic experience, the encounter with the absolute Being in the depths of one's own soul, or whatever description one may prefer to give to the goal of the mystical nostalgia, has been shared by the heirs of rabbinical Judaism. How could it be otherwise with one of the original and fundamental impulses of man? At the same time, such differences as there are, are explained by the existence of an overwhelmingly strong disinclination to treat in express terms of these strictly mystical experiences. Not only is the form different in which these experiences are expressed, but the *will* to express them and to impart the knowledge of them is lacking, or is counteracted by other considerations.

It is well known that the autobiographies of great mystics, who have tried to give an account of their inner experiences in a direct and personal manner, are the glory of mystical literature. These mystical confessions, for all their abounding contradictions, not only provide some of the most important material for the understanding of mysticism, but many of them are also veritable pearls of literature. The Kabbalists, however, are no friends of mystical autobiography.

They aim at describing the realm of Divinity and the other objects of the contemplation in an impersonal way, by burning, as it were, their ships behind them. They glory in objective description and are deeply averse to letting their own personalities intrude into the picture. The wealth of expression at their disposal is not inferior to that of their autobiographical confrères. It is as though they were hampered by a sense of shame. Documents of an intimate and personal nature are not entirely lacking, but it is characteristic that they are to be found almost wholly in manuscripts which the Kabbalists themselves would hardly have allowed to be printed. There has even been a kind of voluntary censorship which the Kabbalists themselves exercised by deleting certain passages of a too intimate nature from the manuscripts, or at least by seeing to it that they were not printed. I shall return to this point at a later stage, when I shall give some remarkable instances of this censorship." On the whole, I am inclined to believe that this dislike of a too personal indulgence in self-expression may have been caused by the fact among others that the Jews retained a particularly vivid sense of the incongruity between mystical experience and that idea of God which stresses the aspects of Creator, King and Law-giver. It is obvious that the absence of the autobiographical element is a serious obstacle to any psychological understanding of Jewish mysticism as the psychology of mysticism has to rely primarily on the study of such autobiographical material.

In general, it may be said that in the long history of Kabbalism, the number of Kabbalists whose teachings and writings bear the imprint of a strong personality is surprisingly small, one notable exception being the Hasidic movement and its leaders since 1750. This is partly due to personal reticence, which as we have seen was characteristic of all Jewish mystics. Equally important, however, is the fact that our sources leave us completely in the dark as regards the personalities of many Kabbalists, including writers whose influence was very great and whose teachings it would be worth while to study in the light of biographical material, were any available. Often enough such contemporary sources as there are do not even mention their names! Frequently, too, all that these writers have left us are their mystical tracts and books from which it is difficult, if not impossible, to form an impression of their personalities. There are very few exceptions to this rule. Among hundreds of Kabbalists

whose writings are known to us, hardly ten would provide sufficient material for a biography containing more than a random collection of facts, with little or nothing to give us an insight into their personalities. This is true, for example, of Abraham Abulafia (13th century), of Isaac Luria (16th century) and, at a much later period, of the great mystic and poet Moses Hayim Luzzatto of Padua (died 1747), whose case is typical of the situation I have described. Although his mystical, moralizing and poetical works fill several volumes and many of them have been published, the true personality of the author remained so completely in the shadow as to be little more than a name until the discovery and publication, by Dr. Simon Ginzburg, of his correspondence with his teacher and his friends threw an abundance of light on this remarkable figure." It is to be hoped that the same will gradually be done for other great Jewish mystics of whom today we know very little.

My second point was that Kabbalism is distinguished by an attitude towards language which is quite unusually positive. Kabbalists who differ in almost everything else are at one in regarding language as something more precious than an inadequate instrument for contact between human beings. To them Hebrew, the holy tongue, is not simply a means of expressing certain thoughts, born out of a certain convention and having a purely conventional character, in accordance with the theory of language dominant in the Middle Ages. Language in its purest form, that is, Hebrew, according to the Kabbalists, reflects the fundamental spiritual nature of the world; in other words, it has a mystical value. Speech reaches God because it comes from God. Man's common language, whose prima facie function, indeed, is only of an intellectual nature, reflects the creative language of God. All creation—and this is an important principle of most Kabbalists—is, from the point of view of God, nothing but an expression of His hidden self that begins and ends by giving itself a name, the holy name of God, the perpetual act of creation. All that lives is an expression of God's language, — and what is it that Revelation can reveal in the last resort if not the name of God?

I shall have to return to this point at a latter stage. What I would like to emphasize is this peculiar interpretation, this enthusiastic appreciation of the faculty of speech which sees in it, and in its

mystical analysis, a key to the deepest secrets of the Creator and His creation.

In this connection it may be of interest to ask ourselves what was the common attitude of the mystics toward certain other faculties and phenomena, such as intellectual knowledge, and more particularly rational philosophy; or, to take another instance, the problem of individual existence. For after all, mysticism, while beginning with the religion of the individual, proceeds to merge the self into a higher union. Mysticism postulates self-knowledge, to use a Platonic term, as the surest way to God who reveals Himself in the depths of the self. Mystical tendencies, in spite of their strictly personal character, have therefore frequently led to the formation of new social groupings and communities, a fact which is true also of Jewish mysticism; we shall have to return to this fact and to the problem it involves at the end of these lectures. At any rate, Joseph Bernhart, one of the explorers of the world of mysticism, was justified in saying "Have any done more to create historical movement than those who seek and proclaim the immovable?"¹⁶

6

It is precisely this question of history which brings us back to the problem from which we started: What is Jewish mysticism? For now the question is: What is to be regarded as the general characteristic of mysticism within the framework of Jewish tradition? Kabbalah, it must be remembered, is not the name of a certain dogma or system, but rather the general term applied to a whole religious movement. This movement, with some of whose stages and tendencies we shall have to acquaint ourselves, has been going on from Talmudic times to the present day; its development has been uninterrupted, though by no means uniform, and often dramatic. It leads from Rabbi Akiba, of whom the Talmud says that he left the 'Paradise' of mystical speculation safe and sane as he had entered it—something which cannot, indeed, be said of every Kabbalist—to the late Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, the religious leader of the Jewish community in Palestine and a splendid type of Jewish mystic.¹⁷ I should like to mention here that we are in possession of a vast printed literature of mystical texts which I am inclined to estimate at 3,000.¹⁸ In addition, there exists an even greater array of manuscripts not yet published.

Within this movement there exists a considerable variety of religious experience, to use William James' expression. There have been many different currents of thought, and various systems and forms of speculation. There is little resemblance between the earliest mystical texts in our possession, dating from Talmudic and post-Talmudic days, the writings of the ancient Spanish Kabbalists, those of the school which later flourished in Safed, the holy city of Kabbalism in the sixteenth century, and finally the Hasidic literature of the modern age. Yet the question must be asked whether there is not something more than a purely historical connection uniting these *disjecta membra*, something which also provides us with a hint as to what renders this mystical movement in Judaism different from non-Jewish mysticism. Such a common denominator can, perhaps, be discovered in certain unchanging fundamental ideas concerning God, creation and the part played by man in the universe. Two such ideas I have mentioned above, namely the attributes of God and the symbolic meaning of the Torah. But may it not also be that such a denominator is to be found in the attitude of the Jewish mystic towards those dominant spiritual forces which have conditioned and shaped the intellectual life of Jewry during the past two thousand years: the Halakhah, the Aggadah, the prayers and the philosophy of Judaism, to name the most important? It is this question which I shall now try to answer, though without going into detail.

As I have said before, the relation of mysticism to the world of history can serve as a useful starting-point for our investigation. It is generally believed that the attitude of mysticism toward history is one of aloofness, or even of contempt. The historical aspects of religion have a meaning for the mystic chiefly as symbols of acts which he conceives as being divorced from time, or constantly repeated in the soul of every man. Thus the exodus from Egypt, the fundamental event of our history, cannot, according to the mystic, have come to pass once only and in one place; it must correspond to an event which takes place in ourselves, an exodus from an inner Egypt in which we all are slaves. Only thus conceived does the Exodus cease to be an object of learning and acquire the dignity of immediate religious experience. In the same way, it will be remembered, the doctrine of "Christ in us" acquired so great an importance for the mystics of Christianity that the historical Jesus

of Nazareth was quite often relegated to the background. If, however, the Absolute which the mystic seeks is not to be found in the varying occurrences of history, the conclusion suggests itself that it must either precede the course of mundane history or reveal itself at the end of time. In other words, knowledge both of the primary facts of creation and of its end, of eschatological salvation and bliss, can acquire a mystical significance.

"The Mystic," says Charles Bennett in a penetrating essay,²⁸ "as it were forestalls the processes of history by anticipating in his own life the enjoyment of the last age." This eschatological nature of mystical knowledge becomes of paramount importance in the writings of many Jewish mystics, from the anonymous authors of the early *Hekhaloth* tracts to Rabbi Nahman of Brazlav. And the importance of cosmogony for mystical speculation is equally exemplified by the case of Jewish mysticism. The consensus of Kabbalistic opinion regards the mystical way to God as a reversal of the procession by which we have emanated from God. To know the stages of the creative process is also to know the stages of one's own return to the root of all existence. In this sense, the interpretation of *Maaseh Bereshith*, the esoteric doctrine of creation, has always formed one of the main preoccupations of Kabbalism. It is here that Kabbalism comes nearest to Neoplatonic thought, of which it has been said with truth that "procession and reversion together constitute a single movement, the diastole-systole, which is the life of the universe."²⁹ Precisely this is also the belief of the Kabbalist.

But the cosmogonic and the eschatological trend of Kabbalistic speculation which we have tried to define, are in the last resort ways of escaping from history rather than instruments of historical understanding; that is to say, they do not help us to gauge the intrinsic meaning of history.

There is, however, a more striking instance of the link between the conceptions of Jewish mysticism and those of the historical world. It is a remarkable fact that the very term *Kabbalah* under which it has become best known, is derived from an historical concept. *Kabbalah* means literally "tradition", in itself an excellent example of the paradoxical nature of mysticism to which I have referred before. The very doctrine which centres about the immediate personal contact with the Divine, that is to say, a highly personal and intimate form of knowledge, is conceived as traditional wisdom.

The fact is, however, that the idea of Jewish mysticism from the start combined the conception of a knowledge which by its very nature is difficult to impart and therefore secret, with that of a knowledge which is the secret tradition of chosen spirits or adepts. Jewish mysticism, therefore, is a secret doctrine in a double sense, a characteristic which cannot be said to apply to all forms of mysticism. It is a secret doctrine because it treats of the most deeply hidden and fundamental matters of human life; but it is secret also because it is confined to a small élite of the chosen who impart the knowledge to their disciples. It is true that this picture never wholly corresponded to life. Against the doctrine of the chosen few who alone may participate in the mystery must be set the fact that, at least during certain periods of history, the Kabbalists themselves have tried to bring under their influence much wider circles, and even the whole nation. There is a certain analogy between this development and that of the mystery religions of the Hellenic period of antiquity, when secret doctrines of an essentially mystical nature were diffused among an ever-growing number of people.

It must be kept in mind that in the sense in which it is understood by the Kabbalist himself, mystical knowledge is not his private affair which has been revealed to him, and to him only, in his personal experience. On the contrary, the purer and more nearly perfect it is, the nearer it is to the original stock of knowledge common to mankind. To use the expression of the Kabbalist, the knowledge of things human and divine that Adam, the father of mankind, possessed is therefore also the property of the mystic. For this reason, the Kabbalah, advanced what was at once a claim and an hypothesis, namely, that its function was to hand down to its own disciples the secret of God's revelation to Adam.³⁰ Little though this claim is grounded in fact—and I am even inclined to believe that many Kabbalists did not regard it seriously—the fact that such a claim was made appears to me highly characteristic of Jewish mysticism. Reverence for the traditional has always been deeply rooted in Judaism, and even the mystics, who in fact broke away from tradition, retained a reverent attitude towards it; it led them directly to their conception of the coincidence of true intuition and true tradition. This theory has made possible such a paradox as the Kabbalah of Isaac Luria, the most influential system of later Kabbalism, though the most difficult. Nearly all the important points

and major theses in Luria's system are novel, one might even say excitingly novel—and yet they were accepted throughout as true Kabbalah, i.e. traditional wisdom. There was nobody to see a contradiction in this.

7

Considerations of a different kind will take us even deeper into the understanding of the problem. I have already said that the mystical sphere is the meeting-place of two worlds or stages in the development of the human consciousness: one primitive and one developed, the world of mythology and that of revelation. This fact cannot be left out of account in dealing with the Kabbalah. Whoever tries to gain a better understanding of its ideas, without attempting anything in the nature of an apology, cannot fail to notice that it contains, side by side with a deep and sensitive understanding of the essence of religious feeling, a certain mode of thought characteristic of primitive mythological thinking. The peculiar affinity of Kabbalist thought to the world of myth cannot well be doubted, and should certainly not be obscured or lightly passed over by those of us to whom the notion of a mythical domain within Judaism seems strange and paradoxical and who are accustomed to think of Jewish Monotheism as the classical example of a religion which has severed all links with the mythical. It is, indeed, surprising that in the very heart of Judaism ideas and notions sprang up which purported to interpret its meaning better than any others, and which yet represent a relapse into, or if you like a revival of, the mythical consciousness. This is particularly true of the Zohar and the Lurianic Kabbalah, that is to say, of those forms of Jewish mysticism which have exerted by far the greatest influence in Jewish history and which for centuries stood out in the popular mind as bearers of the final and deepest truth in Jewish thought.

It is no use getting indignant over these facts, as the great historian Graetz did; they should rather set us thinking. Their importance for the history of the Jewish people, particularly during the past four centuries, has been far too great to permit them to be ridiculed and treated as mere deviations. Perhaps, after all, there is something wrong with the popular conception of Monotheism as being opposed to the mythical; perhaps Monotheism contains room after all, on a deeper plane, for the development of mythical lore.

I do not believe that all those devoted and pious spirits, practically the vast majority of Ashkenazic and Sephardic Jewry, ceased, after the exodus from Spain, to be Jews also in the religious sense, only because their forms of belief appear to be in manifest contradiction with certain modern theories of Judaism. I, therefore, ask myself: What is the secret of this tremendous success of the Kabbalah among our people? Why did it succeed in becoming a decisive factor in our history, shaping the life of a large proportion of Jewry over a period of centuries, while its contemporary, rational Jewish philosophy, was incapable of achieving the spiritual hegemony after which it strove? This is a pressing question; I cannot accept the explanation that the facts I have described are solely due to external historical circumstances, that persecution and decline weakened the spirit of the people and made them seek refuge in the darkness of Mysticism because they could not bear the light of Reason. The matter appears to me to be more complicated, and I should like briefly to set out my answer to the question.

The secret of the success of the Kabbalah lies in the nature of its relation to the spiritual heritage of rabbinical Judaism. This relation differs from that of rationalist philosophy, in that it is more deeply and in a more vital sense connected with the main forces active in Judaism.

Undoubtedly both the mystics and the philosophers completely transform the structure of ancient Judaism; both have lost the simple relation to Judaism, that naiveté which speaks to us from the classical documents of Rabbinical literature. Classical Judaism expressed itself: it did not reflect upon itself. By contrast, to the mystics and the philosophers of a later stage of religious development Judaism itself has become problematical. Instead of simply speaking their minds, they tend to produce an ideology of Judaism, an ideology moreover which comes to the rescue of tradition by giving it a new interpretation. It is not as though the rise of Jewish philosophy and of Jewish mysticism took place in widely separated ages, or as though the Kabbalah, as Graetz saw it, was a reaction against a wave of rationalism. Rather the two movements are inter-related and interdependent. Neither were they from the start manifestly opposed to each other, a fact which is often overlooked. On the contrary, the rationalism of some of the philosophical *enlighteners* frequently betrays a mystical tendency; and conversely, the mystic

who has not yet learnt to speak in his own language often uses and misuses the vocabulary of philosophy. Only very gradually did the Kabbalists, rather than the philosophers, begin to perceive the implications of their own ideas, the conflict between a purely philosophical interpretation of the world, and an attitude which progresses from rational thought to irrational meditation, and from there to the mystical interpretation of the universe.

What many mystics felt towards philosophy was succinctly expressed by Rabbi Moses of Burgos (end of the 13th century). When he heard the philosophers praised, he used to say angrily: "You ought to know that these philosophers whose wisdom you are praising, end where we begin."²³ Actually this means two things: on the one hand, it means that the Kabbalists are largely concerned with the investigation of a sphere of religious reality which lies quite outside the orbit of mediaeval Jewish philosophy; their purpose is to discover a new stratum of the religious consciousness. On the other hand, though R. Moses may not have intended to say this, they stand on the shoulders of the philosophers and it is easier for them to see a little farther than their rivals.

To repeat, the Kabbalah certainly did not *arise* as a reaction against philosophical 'enlightenment,'²⁴ but once it was there it is true that its function was that of an opposition to it. At the same time, an intellectual dispute went on between the Kabbalah and the forces of the philosophical movement which left deep marks upon the former's structure. In my opinion, there is a direct connection between Jehudah Halevi, the most Jewish of Jewish philosophers, and the Kabbalists. For the legitimate trustees of his spiritual heritage have been the mystics, and not the succeeding generations of Jewish philosophers.

The Kabbalists employed the ideas and conceptions of orthodox theology, but the magic hand of mysticism opened up hidden sources of new life in the heart of many scholastic ideas and abstractions. Philosophers may shake their heads at what must appear to them a misunderstanding of the meaning of philosophical ideas. But what from the philosopher's point of view represents a flaw in the conception can constitute its greatness and dignity in the religious sense. After all, a misunderstanding is often nothing but the paradoxical abbreviation of an original line of thought. And

it is precisely such misunderstanding which has frequently become productive of new ideas in the mystical sphere.

Let us take, as an example of what I have said, the idea of "creation out of nothing." In the dogmatic disputations of Jewish philosophy, the question whether Judaism implies belief in this concept, and if so, in what precise sense, has played an important part. I shall not go into the difficulties with which the orthodox theologians found themselves faced whenever they tried to preserve the full meaning of this idea of creation out of nothing. Viewed in its simplest sense, it affirms the creation of the world by God out of something which is neither God Himself nor any kind of existence, but simply the non-existent. The mystics, too, speak of creation out of nothing; in fact, it is one of their favorite formulae. But in their case the orthodoxy of the term conceals a meaning which differs considerably from the original one. This *Nothing* from which everything has sprung is by no means a mere negation; only to us does it present no attributes because it is beyond the reach of intellectual knowledge. In truth, however, this Nothing—to quote one of the Kabbalists—is infinitely more real than all other reality.²⁵ Only when the soul has stripped itself of all limitation and, in mystical language, has descended into the depths of Nothing does it encounter the Divine. For this *Nothing* comprises a wealth of mystical reality although it cannot be defined. "Un Dieu défini serait un Dieu fini." In a word, it signifies the Divine itself, in its most impenetrable guise. And, in fact, *creation out of nothing* means to many mystics just *creation out of God*. Creation out of nothing thus becomes the symbol of emanation, that is to say, of an idea which, in the history of philosophy and theology, stands farthest removed from it.

8

Let us return to our original problem. As we have seen, the renaissance of Judaism on a new plane is the common concern of both the mystics and the philosophers. For all that, there remains a very considerable difference, a good example of which is afforded by the conception of *Sithre Torah*, or "Secrets of the Law". The philosophers no less than the mystics talk of discovering these secrets, using this esoteric phraseology with a profusion hardly distinguishable from the style of the real esoterics and Kabbalists. But what

are these secrets according to the philosopher? They are the truths of philosophy, the truths of the metaphysics or ethics of Aristotle, or Alfarabi or Avicenna; truths, in other words, which were capable of being discovered outside the sphere of religion and which were projected into the old books by way of allegorical or typological interpretation. The documents of religion are therefore not conceived as expressing a separate and distinct world of religious truth and reality, but rather as giving a simplified description of the relations which exist between the ideas of philosophy. The story of Abraham and Sarah, of Lot and his wife, of the Twelve Tribes, etc., are simply descriptions of the relation between matter and form, spirit and matter, or the faculties of the mind. Even where allegorization was not pushed to such absurd extremes, the tendency was to regard the Torah as a mere vehicle of philosophic truth, though indeed one particularly exalted and perfect.

In other words, the philosopher can only proceed with his proper task after having successfully converted the concrete realities of Judaism into a bundle of abstractions. The individual phenomenon is to him no object of his philosophical speculation. By contrast, the mystic refrains from destroying the living texture of religious narrative by allegorizing it, although allegory plays an important part in the writings of a great many Kabbalists. His essential mode of thinking is what I should like to call symbolical in the strictest sense.

This point requires a little further explanation. Allegory consists of an infinite network of meanings and correlations in which everything can become a representation of everything else, but all within the limits of language and expression. To that extent it is possible to speak of allegorical immanence. That which is expressed by and in the allegorical sign is in the first instance something which has its own meaningful context, but by becoming allegorical this something loses its own meaning and becomes the vehicle of something else. Indeed the allegory arises, as it were, from the gap which at this point opens between the form and its meaning. The two are no longer indissolubly welded together; the meaning is no longer restricted to that particular form, nor the form any longer to that particular meaningful content. What appears in the allegory, in short, is the infinity of meaning which attaches to every representation. The "Mysteries of the Torah" which I just mentioned were for the philosophers the natural subject of an allegorical interpre-

tation which gave expression to a new form of the mediaeval mind as much as it implied a veiled criticism of the old.

Allegorization was also, as I have said, a constant preoccupation of the Kabbalists, and it was not on this ground that they differed from the philosophers; nor was it the main constituent of their faith and their method. We must look for this in the attention they gave to the symbol—a form of expression which radically transcends the sphere of allegory. In the mystical symbol a reality which in itself has, for us, no form or shape becomes transparent and, as it were, visible, through the medium of another reality which clothes its content with visible and expressible meaning, as for example the cross for the Christian. The thing which becomes a symbol retains its original form and its original content. It does not become, so to speak, an empty shell into which another content is poured; in itself, through its own existence, it makes another reality transparent which cannot appear in any other form. If allegory can be defined as the representation of an expressible something by another expressible something, the mystical symbol is an expressible representation of something which lies beyond the sphere of expression and communication, something which comes from a sphere whose face is, as it were, turned inward and away from us. A hidden and inexpressible reality finds its expression in the symbol. If the symbol is thus also a sign or representation it is nevertheless more than that.

For the Kabbalist, too, every existing thing is endlessly correlated with the whole of creation; for him, too, everything mirrors everything else. But beyond that he discovers something else which is not covered by the allegorical network: a reflection of the true transcendence. The symbol "signifies" nothing and communicates nothing, but makes something transparent which is beyond all expression. Where deeper insight into the structure of the allegory uncovers fresh layers of meaning, the symbol is intuitively understood all at once—or not at all. The symbol in which the life of the Creator and that of creation become one, is—to use Creuzer's words—"a beam of light which, from the dark and abysmal depths of existence and cognition, falls into our eye and penetrates our whole being." It is a "momentary totality" which is perceived intuitively in a mystical *now*—the dimension of time proper to the symbol.

Of such symbols the world of Kabbalism is full, nay the whole

world is to the Kabbalist such a *corpus symbolicum*. Out of the reality of creation, without the latter's existence being denied or annihilated, the inexpressible mystery of the Godhead becomes visible. In particular the religious acts commanded by the Torah, the *mitswoth*, are to the Kabbalist symbols in which a deeper and hidden sphere of reality becomes transparent. The infinite shines through the finite and makes it more and not less real. This brief summary gives us some idea of the profound difference between the philosophers' allegorical interpretation of religion and its symbolical understanding by the mystics. It may be of interest to note that in the comprehensive commentary on the Torah written by a great mystic of the thirteenth century, Moses Nahmanides, there are many symbolical interpretations as defined here, but not a single instance of allegory.

9

The difference becomes clear if we consider the attitude of philosophy and Kabbalah respectively to the two outstanding creative manifestations of Rabbinical Jewry: Halakhah and Aggadah, Law and Legend. It is a remarkable fact that the philosophers failed to establish a satisfactory and intimate relation to either. They showed themselves unable to make the spirit of Halakhah and Aggadah, both elements which expressed a fundamental urge of the Jewish soul, productive by transforming them into something new.

Let us begin with the Halakhah, the world of sacred law and, therefore, the most important factor in the actual life of ancient Jewry. Alexander Altmann, in raising the question: What is Jewish Theology? is quite justified in regarding as one of the decisive weaknesses of classical Jewish philosophy the fact that it ignored the problem presented by the Halakhah.²⁷ The whole world of religious law remained outside the orbit of philosophical inquiry, which means of course, too, that it was not subjected to philosophical criticism. It is not as if the philosopher denied or defied this world. He, too, lived in it and bowed to it, but it never became part and parcel of his work as a philosopher. It furnished no material for his thoughts. This fact, which is indeed undeniable, is particularly glaring in the case of thinkers like Maimonides and Saadia, in whom the converging streams meet. They fail entirely to establish a true synthesis of the two elements, Halakhah and philosophy, a

fact which has already been pointed out by Samuel David Luzzatto. Maimonides, for instance, begins the *Mishneh Torah*, his great codification of the Halakhah, with a philosophical chapter which has no relation whatever to the Halakhah itself. The synthesis of the spheres remains sterile, and the genius of the man whose spirit moulded them into a semblance of union cannot obscure their intrinsic disparity.

For a purely historical understanding of religion, Maimonides' analysis of the origin of the *mitswoth*, the religious commandments, is of great importance,²⁸ but he would be a bold man who would maintain that his theory of the *mitswoth* was likely to increase the enthusiasm of the faithful for their actual practice, likely to augment their immediate appeal to religious feeling. If the prohibition against seething a kid in its mother's milk and many similar irrational commandments are explicable as polemics against long-forgotten pagan rites, if the offering of sacrifice is a concession to the primitive mind, if other *mitswoth* carry with them antiquated moral and philosophical ideas—how can one expect the community to remain faithful to practices of which the antecedents have long since disappeared or of which the aims can be attained directly through philosophical reasoning? To the philosopher, the Halakhah either had no significance at all, or one that was calculated to diminish rather than to enhance its prestige in his eyes.

Entirely different was the attitude of the Kabbalists. For them the Halakhah never became a province of thought in which they felt themselves strangers. Right from the beginning and with growing determination, they sought to master the world of the Halakhah as a whole and in every detail. From the outset, an ideology of the Halakhah is one of their aims. But in their interpretation of the religious commandments these are not represented as allegories of more or less profound ideas, or as pedagogical measures, but rather as the performance of a secret rite (or *mystery* in the sense in which the term was used by the Ancients).²⁹

Whether one is appalled or not by this transformation of the Halakhah into a sacrament, a mystery rite, by this revival of myth in the very heart of Judaism, the fact remains that it was this transformation which raised the Halakhah to a position of incomparable importance for the mystic, and strengthened its hold over the people. Every *mitswah* became an event of cosmic importance, an

act which had a bearing upon the dynamics of the universe. The religious Jew became a protagonist in the drama of the world; he manipulated the strings behind the scene. Or, to use a less extravagant simile, if the whole universe is an enormous complicated machine, then man is the machinist who keeps the wheels going by applying a few drops of oil here and there, and at the right time. The moral substance of man's action supplies this "oil," and his existence therefore becomes of extreme significance, since it unfolds on a background of cosmic infinitude.

The danger of theosophical schematism or, as S. R. Hirsch put it,²⁹ of "magical mechanism" is, of course, inherent in such an interpretation of the Torah, and it has more than once raised its head in the development of Kabbalism. There is danger of imagining a magical mechanism to be operative in every sacramental action, and this imagination is attended by a decline in the essential spontaneity of religious action. But then this conflict is inseparable from any and every fulfilment of a religious command, since every prescribed duty is also conceived as assumed willingly and spontaneously. The antinomy is, in fact, inescapable, and can only be overcome by religious feeling so long as it is strong and unbroken. When it begins to flag, the contradiction between command and free-will increases in proportion and eventually gathers sufficient force to become destructive.

By interpreting every religious act as a mystery, even where its meaning was clear for all to see or was expressly mentioned in the written or oral Law, a strong link was forged between Kabbalah and Halakkah, which appears to me to have been, in large part, responsible for the influence of Kabbalistic thought over the minds and hearts of successive generations.

A good deal of similarity to what I have said about the Halakhah is apparent in the attitude of philosophers and mystics, respectively, to the Aggadah. Here too, their ways part right from the beginning. The Aggadah is a wonderful mirror of spontaneous religious life and feeling during the rabbinical period of Judaism. In particular, it represents a method of giving original and concrete expression to the deepest motive-powers of the religious Jew, a quality which helps to make it an excellent and genuine approach to the essentials of our religion. However, it was just this quality which never ceased to baffle the philosophers of Judaism. Their

treatment of the Aggadah, except where it pointed an ethical moral, is embarrassed and fumbling. They almost certainly regarded it as a stumbling-block rather than as a precious heritage, let alone a key to a mystery. And thus it is not surprising that their allegorical interpretation of its meaning reflects an attitude which is not that of the Aggadah. Only too frequently their allegorizations are simply, as I have said, veiled criticism.

Here again the Kabbalists conceive their task differently, although it also involves a transformation of the subject's meaning. It would be too much to say that they leave the meaning of the Aggadah intact. What makes them differ from the philosophers is the fact that for them the Aggadah is not just a dead letter. They live in a world historically continuous with it, and they are able, therefore, to enhance it, though in the spirit of mysticism. Aggadic productivity has been a constant element of Kabbalistic literature, and only when the former disappears will the latter, too, be doomed to extinction. The whole of Aggadah can in a way be regarded as a popular mythology of the Jewish universe. Now, this mythical element which is deeply rooted in the creative forms of Aggadic production, operates on different planes in the old Aggadah and in Kabbalism. The difference between the Aggadic production of the Kabbalah and that of the early Midrash can be easily gauged: in the Aggadah of the Kabbalists the events take place on a considerably wider stage, a stage with a cosmic horizon. Earth and heaven meet already in the ancient Aggadah, but now an even greater stress is laid on the heavenly element which comes more and more to the fore. All events assume gigantic dimensions and a wider significance; the steps of the heroes of the Kabbalistic Aggadah are directed by hidden forces from mysterious regions, while their doings react, at the same time, upon the upper world. Seen that way, there is nothing more instructive than a comparison between the two great and truly comprehensive collections, or *Yal-kutim*, each one representing, respectively, one of the two types of Aggadic creation. The compiler of the *Yalkut Shim'oni* collected in the thirteenth century the old Aggadahs which, as preserved by the Midrashic literature, accompanied the biblical text. In the *Yalkut Reubeni*, on the other hand, we have a collection of the Aggadic output of the Kabbalists during five centuries. The latter highly interesting work which was compiled during the second half

of the seventeenth century bears full witness to the growing strength and preponderance of the mythical element and to the great difference between Aggadah and Kabbalah in their interpretation of the stories of Biblical heroes. At the same time it is obvious that in comparison with the older Aggadah the realistic element in the later Aggadah has decreased because the realistic foundations, in which Jewish life was rooted, have grown more and more narrow. In fact, this explanation falls in well with the historical experience of the different generations. The old Aggadah is fed by deep and comprehensive experience; the life which it reflects has not yet become colourless, nor did it lose its impetus. The Kabbalistic Aggadah, in contrast, reflects a narrow and circumscribed life which sought, nay, was compelled to seek, inspiration from hidden worlds, as the real world turned for them into the world of the Ghetto. The Aggadic myth of the *Yalkut Reubeni* expresses the historical experience of the Jewish people after the Crusades, and we may say that it is expressed with rather greater force because it is not directly mentioned at all. The depth of the penetration into the hidden worlds which can be encountered here at every step stands in direct proportion to the shrinking perimeter of their historical experience. There is thus a mighty difference of function between the two types of Aggadic creation but no difference of essence.

There is another point worth mentioning. No Kabbalist was ever embarrassed by or ashamed of an old Aggadah; in particular those Aggadahs, which were anathema to 'enlightened' Jews, were enthusiastically hailed by the Kabbalists as symbols of their own interpretation of the Universe. The anthropomorphical and paradoxical Aggadahs belong to this class, as well as certain epigrams, such as R. Abbahu's saying, that before making this world God made many others and destroyed them because he did not like them.³⁰ The philosophers, who had passed through the school of Aristotle, never felt at home in the world of Midrash. But the more extravagant and paradoxical these Aggadahs appeared to them, the more were the Kabbalists convinced that they were one of the keys to the mystical realm. Their vocabulary and favorite similes show traces of Aggadic influence in proportions equal to those of philosophy and Gnosticism; Scripture being, of course, the strongest element of all.

What has been said of the Halakhah and the Aggadah is also true of the liturgy, the world of prayer; the last of the three domains in which the religious spirit of post-Biblical Judaism has found its classical expression. Here too the conclusion is inescapable that the philosophers had little of value to contribute. Of entire prayers written by philosophers only a few have been preserved, and these are often somewhat anaemic and half-hearted in their approach, especially where the authors were not, like Solomon ibn Gabirol and Jehudah Halevi, motivated in the last resort by mystical leanings. There is in many of them a curious lack of true religious feeling. The case is entirely different when we turn to the Kabbalistic attitude towards prayer; there is perhaps no clearer sign that Kabbalism is essentially a religious and not a speculative phenomenon. The novelty of its attitude to prayer can be viewed under two aspects: the vast number of prayers whose authors were mystics themselves, and the mystical interpretation of the old traditional community prayers—the backbone of Jewish liturgy.

To begin with the former, it is hardly surprising that the new religious revelation, peculiar to the visionaries of the Kabbalah, for which there existed no liturgical equivalent in the older prayers, strove after some form of expression and had already inspired the earliest mystics to write their own prayers. The first prayers of a mystical character, which can be traced back to the Kabbalists of Provence and Catalonia,³¹ are carried forward by a long and varied tradition to the prayers in which, about 1820, Nathan of Nemirov, the disciple of Rabbi Nahman of Brazlav, gave valid expression to the world of Hasidic Zaddikism.³² This mystical prayer, which bears little outward resemblance to the older liturgy, and in particular of course to the classical forms of communal prayer, flows from the new religious experience to which the Kabbalists were entitled to lay claim. Often these prayers bear the mark of directness and simplicity, and give plain expression to the common concern of every form of mysticism. But not infrequently their language is that of the symbol and their style reveals the secret pathos of magical conjuration. This has found a profound expression in the mystical interpretation of the phrase of Psalm cxxx, 1 "Out of the depths I have called unto Thee"; which, according to the Zohar, means not

"I have called unto Thee from the depths [where I am]" but "from the depths [in which Thou art] I call Thee up."³³

But side by side with these original productions of the Kabbalistic spirit we find from the earliest beginnings down to our time another tendency, that of mystical reinterpretation of the traditional community liturgy which transforms it into a symbol of the mystical way and the way of the world itself. This transformation, which has meant a great deal for the true life of the Kabbalist, has become crystallized in the conception of *Kawwanah*, i.e. mystical intention or concentration, which is its instrument.³⁴ In the words of the liturgy as in the old Aggadahs, the Kabbalists found a way to hidden worlds and the first causes of all existence. They developed a technique of meditation which enabled them to extract, as it were, the mystical prayer from the exoteric prayer of the community the text of which followed a fixed pattern. The fact that this form of prayer was conceived not as a free effusion of the soul but as a mystical act in the strict sense of the term, as an act, that is to say, which is directly linked with the inner cosmic process, invests this conception of *Kawwanah* with a solemnity which not only approaches but also passes the border of the magical. It is significant that of all the various forms of Kabbalistic thought and practice this meditative mysticism of prayer has alone survived and has taken the place of all the others. At the end of a long process of development in which Kabbalism, paradoxical though it may sound, has influenced the course of Jewish history, it has become again what it was in the beginning: the esoteric wisdom of small groups of men out of touch with life and without any influence on it.

11

As I have already said, mysticism represents, to a certain extent, a revival of mythical lore. This brings us to another and very serious point which I should like at least to mention. The Jewish mystic lives and acts in perpetual rebellion against a world with which he strives with all his zeal to be at peace. Conversely, this fact is responsible for the profound ambiguity of his outlook, and it also explains the apparent self-contradiction inherent in a great many Kabbalist symbols and images. The great symbols of the Kabbalah certainly spring from the depths of a creative and genuinely Jewish religious

feeling, but at the same time they are invariably tinged by the world of mythology. In the lectures on the Zohar and on Lurianic Kabbalism I shall give a number of particularly outstanding instances of this fact. Failing this mythical element, the ancient Jewish mystics would have been unable to compress into language the substance of their inner experience. It was Gnosticism, one of the last great manifestations of mythology in religious thought, and definitely conceived in the struggle against Judaism as the conqueror of mythology, which lent figures of speech to the Jewish mystic.

The importance of this paradox can hardly be exaggerated; it must be kept in mind that the whole meaning and purpose of those ancient myths and metaphors whose remainders the editors of the book *Bahir*, and therefore the whole Kabbalah, inherited from the Gnostics³⁵, was simply the subversion of a law which had, at one time, disturbed and broken the order of the mythical world. Thus through wide and scattered provinces of Kabbalism, the revenge of myth upon its conqueror is clear for all to see, and together with it we find an abundant display of contradictory symbols. It is characteristic of Kabbalistic theology in its systematical forms that it attempts to construct and to describe a world in which something of the mythical has again come to life, in terms of thought which exclude the mythical element. However, it is this contradiction which more than anything else explains the extraordinary success of Kabbalism in Jewish history.

Mystics and philosophers are, as it were, both aristocrats of thought; yet Kabbalism succeeded in establishing a connection between its own world and certain elemental impulses operative in every human mind. It did not turn its back upon the primitive side of life, that all-important region where mortals are afraid of life and in fear of death, and derive scant wisdom from rational philosophy. Philosophy ignored these fears, out of whose substance man wove myths, and in turning its back upon the primitive side of man's existence, it paid a high price in losing touch with him altogether. For it is cold comfort to those who are plagued by genuine fear and sorrow to be told that their troubles are but the workings of their own imagination.

The fact of the existence of evil in the world is the main touchstone of this difference between the philosophic and the Kabbalistic outlook. On the whole, the philosophers of Judaism treat the exis-

tence of evil as something meaningless in itself. Some of them have shown themselves only too proud of this negation of evil as one of the fundamentals of what they call rational Judaism. Hermann Cohen has said with great clarity and much conviction: "Evil is non-existent. It is nothing but a concept derived from the concept of freedom. *A power of evil exists only in myth.*"³⁶ One may doubt the philosophical truth of this statement, but assuming its truth it is obvious that something can be said for 'myth' in its struggle with 'philosophy'. To most Kabbalists, as true seal-bearers of the world of myth, the existence of evil is, at any rate, one of the most pressing problems, and one which keeps them continuously occupied with attempts to solve it. They have a strong sense of the reality of evil and the dark horror that is about everything living. They do not, like the philosophers, seek to evade its existence with the aid of a convenient formula; rather do they try to penetrate into its depth. And by doing so, they unwittingly establish a connection between their own strivings and the vital interests of popular belief—you may call it superstition—and all of those concrete manifestations of Jewish life in which these fears found their expression. It is a paradoxical fact that none other than the Kabbalists, through their interpretation of various religious acts and customs, have made it clear what they signified to the average believer, if not what they really meant from the beginning. Jewish folklore stands as a living proof of this contention, as has been shown by modern research in respect of some particularly well-known examples.³⁷

It would be idle to deny that Kabbalistic thought lost much of its magnificence where it was forced to descend from the pinnacles of theoretical speculation to the plane of ordinary thinking and acting. The dangers which myth and magic present to the religious consciousness, including that of the mystic, are clearly shown in the development of Kabbalism. If one turns to the writings of great Kabbalists one seldom fails to be torn between alternate admiration and disgust. There is need for being quite clear about this in a time like ours, when the fashion of uncritical and superficial condemnation of even the most valuable elements of mysticism threatens to be replaced by an equally uncritical and obscurantist glorification of the Kabbalah. I have said before that Jewish philosophy had to pay a high price for its escape from the pressing questions of real life. But Kabbalism, too, has had to pay for its success.

Philosophy came dangerously near to losing the living God; Kabbalism, which set out to preserve Him, to blaze a new and glorious trail to Him, encountered mythology on its way and was tempted to lose itself in its labyrinth.

12

One final observation should be made on the general character of Kabbalism as distinct from other, non-Jewish, forms of mysticism. Both historically and metaphysically it is a masculine doctrine, made for men and by men. The long history of Jewish mysticism shows no trace of feminine influence. There have been no women Kabbalists; Rabia of early Islamic mysticism, Mechthild of Magdeburg, Juliana of Norwich, Theresa de Jesus, and the many other feminine representatives of Christian mysticism have no counterparts in the history of Kabbalism.³⁸ The latter, therefore, lacks the element of feminine emotion which has played so large a part in the development of non-Jewish mysticism, but it also remained comparatively free from the dangers entailed by the tendency towards hysterical extravagance which followed in the wake of this influence.

This exclusively masculine character of Kabbalism was by no means the result of the social position of Jewish women or their exclusion from Talmudic learning. Scholasticism was as much exclusively a domain of men as Talmudism, and yet the social position of women in Islam and in Mediaeval Christianity did not prevent their playing a highly important part among the representatives—though not the theoreticians—of Islamic and Christian mysticism. It is hardly possible to conceive Catholic mysticism without them. This exclusive masculinity for which Kabbalism has paid a high price, appears rather to be connected with an inherent tendency to lay stress on the demonic nature of woman and the feminine element of the cosmos.

It is of the essence of Kabbalistic symbolism that woman represents not, as one might be tempted to expect, the quality of tenderness but that of stern judgment. This symbolism was unknown to the old mystics of the Merkabah period, and even to the Hasidim in Germany, but it dominates Kabbalistic literature from the very beginning and undoubtedly represents a constituent element of Kabbalistic theology. The demonic, according to the Kabbalists, is

an off-spring of the feminine sphere. This view does not entail a negation or repudiation of womanhood—after all the Kabbalistic conception of the Shekhinah has room for the, to orthodox Jewish thought, highly paradoxical idea of a feminine element in God Himself—but it does constitute a problem for the psychologist and the historian of religion alike. Mention has already been made of the dislike shown by the Kabbalists for any form of literary publicity in connection with mystical experience, and of their tendency towards the objectivization of mystical vision. These traits, too, would appear to be connected with the masculine character of the movement, for the history of mystical literature shows that women were among the outstanding representatives of the tendency towards mystical autobiography and subjectivism in expressing religious experience.

If, finally, you were to ask me what kind of value I attach to Jewish mysticism, I would say this: Authoritative Jewish theology, both mediaeval and modern, in representatives like Saadia, Maimonides and Hermann Cohen, has taken upon itself the task of formulating an antithesis to pantheism and mythical theology, i. e.: to prove them wrong. In this endeavour it has shown itself tireless. What is really required, however, is an understanding of these phenomena which yet does not lead away from monotheism; and once their significance is grasped, that elusive something in them which may be of value must be clearly defined. To have posed this problem is the historic achievement of Kabbalism. The varying answers it supplied to the question may be as inadequate as you like; I shall certainly be the last to deny that its representatives often lost their way and went over the edge of the precipice. But the fact remains that they faced a problem which others were more concerned to ignore and which is of the greatest importance for Jewish theology.

The particular forms of symbolical thought in which the fundamental attitude of the Kabbalah found its expression, may mean little or nothing to us (though even today we cannot escape, at times, from their powerful appeal). But the attempt to discover the hidden life beneath the external shapes of reality and to make visible that abyss in which the symbolic nature of all that exists reveals itself: this attempt is as important for us today as it was for those ancient mystics. For as long as nature and man are conceived as His

creations, and that is the indispensable condition of highly developed religious life, the quest for the hidden life of the transcendent element in such creation will always form one of the most important preoccupations of the human mind.