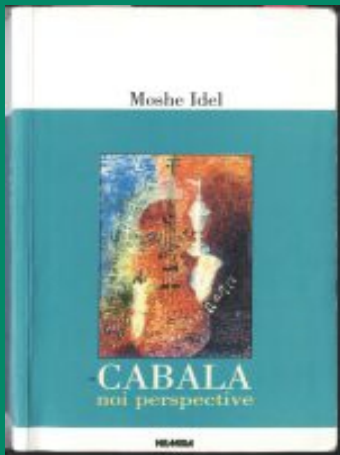


Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah - New Perspectives*, Nemira Publishing House, Bucuresti, 2000



This book, written by M. Idel stands for, as the title indicates, a new interpretative approach to this little known aspects of Jewish religious experience. The author maintains the hypothesis that Kabbalah appeared at the end of the twelfth century and the beginning of the thirteenth century as a reaction against the decline of the ancient mystical traditions. This was determined by the daring re-interpretation of Jewish esoterism provided by Maimonides, as well as by his attempt to replace the mystical traditions with philosophical interpretation. Therefore, historical Kabbalah emerges as a result of the continuous endeavor to systematize the existing elements of theurgy, myth and mystic into a complex answer to the challenge launched by rationalism.

In *Kabbalah-New Perspective*, M. Idel proposes an analysis of the two major orientations of Kabbalah: the theosophic-theurgic orientation and the ecstatic-prophetic one. The author does not provide an historical approach of the two tendencies, but prefers a phenomenological one discussing the significance of the two models and their conditions of emergence, with emphasis on their evolution.

The aim of this work is both to offer some personal comments of some texts which remained inac-

cessible for G. Scholem and to point out “some of the texts the scholar has dealt with hurriedly” (pp. 43). M. Idel employs key-words such as: esoterism/exoterism, innovation/conservatism, theocentrism/anthropocentrism, theurgy/unio mystica, philosophy/Kabbalah, mystical salvation of the individual/national eschatology; these key-words are regarded as of equal importance to the spatial and temporal data which define each Kabbalistic text.

The author examines early Jewish sources in order to underline both the concepts in Kabbalah and the mystical techniques it makes use of.

One may notice that the first major model of Kabbalah, namely the theosophic-theurgic one, is centered on two fundamental topics: theosophy which provides an elaborate theoretical structure of the divine world, and the ritual and concrete methods necessary to entering into union with Divinity.

This union is needed in order to establish a state of harmony. It is in this way that a new form of theocentric religiosity emerges, which tends to conceive religious perfection as an instrument through which the practitioner exerts an effective power over the heavenly things without overlooking the needs of the human being.

The second major model of Kabbalah, the ecstatic one, is utterly anthropocentric as it conceives the practitioner’s mystical experience a *summum bonum* in itself, paying little attention to a possible influence of the mystical state over the inner harmony of the divine. The theurgic act, here, is outlined in the form of

the continuous experience to which the practitioner is summoned to bring his contribution in order to combine the powers of Divinity; yet let's not forget that this is also a theocentric technique. Although the act happens in the practitioner's mind, he has to integrate the ten *sephirot* to their origin as they display in the Tetragrammaton letters.

In his analysis, M. Idel considers that the inner mental processes have the capacity for activating the divine powers by their reflection in the human thoughts, this leading to a manner of interiorization with the divine, a mystical union with *imago dei*.

I have to mention that many of the examples regarding *Devekut* are taken from the early versions of Provençal and Catalan Kabbalah, or from Isaac of Acre. This is a consequence of the decrease of interest in *Devekut*, the Spanish Kabbalah, in the second half of the thirteen century. This trend also appears in *Sefer ha-Zohar*, as well as in the works of Moses of Leon, Joseph Ghikatilla, Joseph of Hamadan, Joseph Angelino, and David ben Iehuda he-Hasid. Idel states that the existence of such elaborate mystical techniques certifies the tokens of Jewish practitioners; an additional argument is the fact that not only did they describe their mystical experiences, but they also presented the techniques they had made use of. Thus, M. Idel analyzes two fundamental techniques that were employed: the *nomik* and the *a-nomic* ones. The *nomik* techniques make reference to the halakhic practices which will be deliberately observed by the Kabbalist. They are also called *Kavana*, one of its aims is *Devekut*. In other

words, *nomik* indicates inner spirituality of a halakhic path which becomes a mystical technique. The *a-nomic* practices are forms of mystical activity which do not imply the halakhic ones, and in the late periods of Jewish mysticism, the *a-nomic* practices have formed the most esoteric part of the Kabbalistic techniques. The scholar discusses four types of mystical techniques: weeping, and the ascent of the soul - which illustrate the perpetuity of the Jewish tradition regardless of the theological doctrines which occurred over the centuries - and the combination of letters and contemplation of colors - which stand for the "the intensive techniques specific to the medieval period.

In theosophic Kabbalah there is also signaled the existence of dynamic and complex structures formed by divine powers called *Sephirot*, explained in *Sefer Yezirah* (the end of the thirteenth century). *Sephirot* designate manifestations which are part of the divine structure or are directly related to its essence, serving as instruments or vessels. There are ten *Sephirot*. M. Idel maintains that this divine anthropomorphic decade which was employed in the creation process was part of the ancient Jewish thought. The analysis of the concepts of *Sephirot* has as its starting point their understanding as both the essence of the Divinity without neglecting their interpretation as vessels in *Sefer ha-Bahir*, and as mode for the divine immanence due to a theory based on the existence of ten inferior *Sephirot* which form "the world of Creation" which is identical to our world or directly connected to it. By further research on the theory according to which a

determined mystical system focuses on inner experiences rather than on theurgic activity, M. Idel comes to the conclusion that the entities which need to be activated are no longer the divine Sephirot, but the spiritual human Sephirot.

Therefore the zoharic and lurianic super-structure is not understood as being integrated in man, but, on what David of Makov asserts, through man. According to Hasidic sources, Kabbalah represents a paradigm of the human psychic and of human activities, rather than a theosophic system. Still, M. Idel points out that the theosophic mystic aims at a clear understanding of the divine entities and the relations between these, by means of fulfilling the ritual deliberately, thus allowing the Kabbalist to transcend the mundane and to experience the Divine. The link between the Divine and the worldly level may be explained by the theory of emanation: the world of human beings is understood as an inferior extension of a super-mundane power. Kabbalistic theosophy emphasizes the transcendence of the major concepts which it dealt with, and the employment of the Kabbalistic ritual as the chief manner to abolish the gap between man and the Divine.

The emphasis laid on human activity is presented as an emotional state and not a complex theosophic-theurgic activity; this led to a change of orientation from an elite-based theurgy, which characterized Luria's Kabbalah, to a popular one specific to Hasidic mysticism. Taking into account this change, M. Idel suggests the hypothesis of a wider dissemination of

Kabbalah. This will allow us to state that instead of a mystical participation of the Kabbalist in the divine life, we are dealing with a mystical participation of the Divine in the human life.

When discussing the Kabbalistic methods of interpretation, M. Idel criticizes the fact that contemporary researchers have neglected and ignored the complex relations between the Kabbalist as interpreter and the divine text, and thus suggesting as alternatives two directions in Kabbalah: there is on one hand its symbolism, which does not refer to mystical union, and on the other hand its mystical union, which operates as a non-symbolic language. When Kabbalah focuses on psychological processes, or when its theology is mostly oriented towards philosophy than theosophy, the role of symbol reduces extremely. In Abraham Abulafia's case, the symbol is completely removed.

Symbolism in Kabbalah may be regarded as a part of a thoroughgoing study for understanding the human activity which is oriented towards the upper world, rather than a revelation of the immovable significance intended on certain words. M. Idel distinguishes three stages of symbolism: the understanding of the theosophic-theurgic significance of the verse, attaining the human status, and establishing the divine harmony by fulfilling the commandments after one has reached human perfection.

This new way of interpreting Kabbalistic symbolism allows the Kabbalistic exegesis to cast relations in the human world on the inner structure of Divinity, thus offering us a representation of the dynamism in



this field. Kabbalah is characterized by the importance shown to theosophy and to the theosophic processes, which is underlined by its symbolism.

M. Idel claims that in order to understand the higher structures and dynamics of Kabbalah, the practitioner is summoned to take his/her stand in the divine mystery by means of an imitation of these dynamics. The major role of symbolism is that of reflecting the theosophic structure.

M. Idel succeeds in this vast work in alternating phenomenology, the science of the text, history and psychology so that their blending should help the reader to consider in full the various aspects of the texts and ideas in Kabbalah.

The outlook of the Romanian reader on Kabbalah, though quite poor as regarding the domain of the mystic, expands substantially by the amount and the novelty of the information put together in this major work of the scholar M. Idel, professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

Petru Moldovan

Moshe Idel, *Maimonides and the Jewish Mystic*, Dacia Publishing House, Cluj-Napoca, 2001

By the studies joined in “Maimonides and the Jewish Mystic,” published by Editura Dacia, M. Idel attempts to underline a specific approach to the relation between philosophical and religious meditation, analyzing the standard modes of the major tendencies in Kabbalah versus Maimonides’ philosophy.

These specific and contradictory attitudes make the author assert that some of the first kabbalists had tried to re-emphasize the importance of an older mystical tradition in response to Maimonides’ two important statements by which he considered that authentic Jewish esoterism was lost and suggested an Aristotelean interpretation of the accounts “Genesis” and “the Chariot”. Certain kabbalists who belonged to the major school of Kabbalah relaying on Sefer ha-Zohar, who had embraced the Sephirotic theosophy, having been also influenced by neo-Platonism, had negatively responded towards Maimonides’ philosophy. Nevertheless, the ecstatic school whose main representative was Abraham Abulafia, had employed notions from Maimonides’ philosophy in order to built up concepts which would enable Abulafia to depict the mystical experiences; this is evident in the terminology which Abulafia made use of to speak about the experiences of unio mystica.