

THE MEANING OF THE TORAH
IN JEWISH MYSTICISM. II

IV

This principle of the Torah as a living unit connects with the third principle we are now ready to discuss, that of the manifold and even infinite meanings of the Torah. The different limbs in the simile of the organism were frequently interpreted not as coordinate organs on the same level of importance, but as different layers of meaning, leading the mystical student of the Sacred Text from the outer and exoteric meaning to ever deeper strata of understanding. The idea of an organism becomes identified here with the idea of a living hierarchy of meanings.

The Kabbalistic conception meets here with another line of thought inherited from the Jewish philosophers, especially from those who wrote in Arabic and who were steeped in Arab philosophic tradition. It is well known that in this literature the dualism of the two layers of the holy text, the outer and the inner, had come to be considered of great importance. I need not go into detail here about the trend in the religious history of Islam, especially of its esoteric sects like the *Ismailiyya*, known as *Batiniyya*, who stressed the inner, allegoric or mystical meaning of the Koran, in

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contrast to the outward or simple meaning, which in the higher degrees of initiation became meaningless. It is interesting to note that the terms used by some Jewish philosophers to designate this dualism, *hitzon* and *penimi* (outer and inner), are not to be found in this connection in older Jewish sources but are exact translations of the Arabic terms used in this connection. There is no doubt concerning the fact that the terminology developed first in Islamic circles before it was taken over by Jewish philosophers. With the latter, the inner meaning was identified with the philosophic interpretation placed upon the text rather than with an esoteric or mystical understanding in its more precise sense.

This terminology was taken over by the Kabbalists in Spain and finally by the author of the Zohar who translated it into Aramic. The principle of *ṣōraithā setīm ve-galyā* (the Torah is both hidden and revealed), esoteric and exoteric, is developed in many passages of the Zohar. The author sees this dualism, of course, not only in the Torah, but in each and every stratum of Being, from God Himself through all aspects of Creation.

It should not be forgotten that Spanish Kabbalists worked in a spiritual climate where ideas from the Christian surroundings and its specific religious tradition could find their way into Jewish circles as well. Two different outgrowths from the same ancient root come together here in the final development of Zoharic doctrine. This ancient root is, of course, Philo of Alexandria, from whom in the last analysis all these differentiations between the literal and spiritual sense have come down both to patristic and medieval Christianity as well as (through Christian oriental sources) to Islam.

The Zoharic doctrine of several layers of meaning, in fact, poses a problem, that of its possible connections with the similar but older teachings regarding the fourfold meaning of Scripture as expounded by Christian writers in the medieval period. Wilhelm Bacher in a valuable paper on Biblical exegesis in the Zohar held as early as sixty-five years ago that such a historical connection indeed existed.¹ Having no clear idea, however, about the precise nature of the several literary strata in the Zohar, he could not formulate his conclusions with that measure of precision which I think it is possible to attain now. Before discussing the position of the Zohar, however, another observation should be made. As was previously noted, the inner meaning of the Torah was identified by many Jewish philosophers with allegory. Indeed, many of their allegoric

1. Bacher, "L'Exegèse biblique dans le Zohar," *Revue des Etudes juives*, Vol. 22 (1891), pp. 33-46.

expositions have a strong Philonic tinge. Ideas and teachings of a philosophic character are rediscovered in Scripture. Allegory in this sense, however, was not the backbone of Kabbalistic exegesis, which was symbolic in a stricter sense. What Kabbalistic exegesis detected beneath the literal sense of the Bible and its Talmudic interpretations is something else. Kabbalists find in Scripture not primarily a formulation of philosophic ideas, but rather symbolic representation of the hidden process of Divine life unfolding in the manifestations and emanations of the *Saphirot*. This theosophic interest is paramount with them. As to allegory, the Kabbalists are deeply divided in their attitude. An outstanding authority such as Nahmanides in his commentary on the Pentateuch consistently refrains from making any reference to allegoric interpretation in the ways of the philosophers. He undoubtedly was aware of the danger for the observance of Jewish ritual which could be engendered by the spiritualization of the Torah inherent in allegory. He gives explicit warning of such danger in a passage of his commentary (Deut. 29:29) for some reason missing in our editions.² No such danger was inherent, in his view, in the mystical interpretation of the Biblical text, where the mystery of the symbol had meaning only through the performance of the act of the commandment itself. Not all of the Kabbalists, however, took the same cautious attitude towards allegory. Many of them viewed it as a legitimate vehicle of interpretation. The author of the Zohar himself, as a matter of fact, although predominantly interested in the description of the hidden world of Divinity by means of mystical symbolism, does not exclude allegorical interpretations of certain parts of Scripture. Thus the Book of Jonah, as well as the stories of the Patriarchs, are interpreted by him, aside from theosophical meaning, as allegories of the fate of the human soul. The moment the inner interpretation of Scripture was seen to have two aspects, the allegoric and the mystic proper, the way was opened to conceive of the Torah as appearing in four different layers of meaning. Whereas Joseph Ibn 'Aqnin, pupil of Maimonides, consistently used three layers of interpretation in his *Commentary to Canticles*—literal, aggadic, and philosophic-allegoric—the Kabbalists now added a fourth layer, that of the theosophic mystery in its proper sense, frequently called in the Zohar *raza de mehemanuta* (“understanding according to the mystery of faith”).

This idea of an essentially fourfold meaning of the Torah made its appearance at about the same time in three Kabbalistic writers at the end of

2. Cf. my Hebrew book on the beginnings of the Kabbalah, *Reshith ha-Rubalah* (1948), p. 152.

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the thirteenth century, who probably belonged to the same circle. These are Moses de Leon, who is also the author of the main part of the Zohar, Bahya ben Asher, and Joseph Gikatila. The definitions given by them, however, to the fourfold meaning are in some ways at variance with one another. Most important, both intrinsically and from the point of view of its subsequent influence on the whole of Jewish mysticism, is the development which the fourfold layer of meaning has taken on in the Zoharic literature.

The oldest reference to this fourfold interpretation is to be found in the *Midrash Haneclam* on Ruth: "The words of the Torah are likened to a nut. How? He explained: Just as the nut has an external shell and the kernel within, so, too, does the word of the Torah contain fact (*ma'asseh*), midrash, haggadah, and mystery (*sod*), each being deeper (in meaning) than the preceding."³ This passage is remarkable in several ways. It does not make use as yet of any catchword or formula to designate the four layers. Nor does it make explicit the difference between *midrash* and *haggadah*, leaving the impression that *haggadah* refers to some allegoric or tropic form of interpretation, in contradistinction to the method used by the halakhists to extract their own distinctive interpretation, which is *midrash*. The comparison of the Torah with the nut is not novel in Jewish literature, having been used by the Hassidim of Germany and France in the early thirteenth century. It was a particularly suggestive comparison inasmuch as the nut was said to contain not only the hard outer shell, but also two more delicate inner covers shielding the kernel. The same simile, by the way, was used in the late twelfth century by the famous Calabrian monk and seer Joachim of Floris in his *Enchiridion in Apocalypsin*.⁴

The same sequence, but in a somewhat detailed explanation, appears in the main part of the Zohar, in a passage which has become a *locus classicus* with the Kabbalists: "The Torah is like unto a beautiful and stately damsel who is hidden in a secluded chamber of a palace and who has a lover of whom nobody knows but she. Out of his love for her he constantly passes by her gate, turning his eyes towards all sides to find her. She, knowing that he is always haunting the palace, what does she do? She opens a little door in her hidden palace, discloses for a moment her face to her lover, then swiftly hides it again. None but he notices it; but his

3. Zohar hadash (885) fol. 83 a. This earliest statement escaped Bacher's notice.

4. Ch. J. Ch. Huck, *Joachim von Floris und die joachitische Literatur* (1938), p. 291, *si ad nucis dulcedinem pervenire volumus, primo necesse est, ut amoveatur exterior cortex, secunda testa, et ita tercio loco perveniatur ad nucleam*. Cf. also *ibid.*, p. 148.

heart and soul and all that is in him are drawn to her. . . . It is the same with the Torah, which reveals her hidden secrets only to those who love her. She knows that he who is wise of heart daily haunts the gates of her house. What does she do? She shows her face to him from the palace, giving him a sign, and straightway hides herself again. All those who are there do not know nor see anything save himself alone, and he is drawn to her with heart and soul and all his being. Thus the Torah reveals and hides itself, and through the signs of her own love arouses fresh love in her lover. Come and see: this is the way of the Torah. At first, when she begins to reveal herself to a man, she makes but a momentary sign to him. Should he understand, well and good; if not, then she sends for him and calls him 'simpleton,' saying to her messengers: 'Tell that simpleton to come here and converse with me,' as it is written: 'Whoso is a simpleton let him turn in hither' (Prov. 9:4). When he comes to her, from behind a curtain which she has spread for him, she begins to speak to him, words suitable to his mode of understanding until little by little insight comes to him, and this is called *derasha*. Then she speaks to him from behind a thinner veil words of allegoric riddle (*milin de hida*) and this goes by the name of *haggadah*. When at last he is familiar with her, she reveals herself to him face to face and converses with him about all her hidden mysteries which have been secreted in her heart from primordial days. Then such a man is perfect, a 'master of the Torah,' in its precise meaning, namely like the master of the house, since she has revealed to him all her mysteries, withholding and hiding nothing. She says to him: 'Do you recall the sign I gave you at first, how many mysteries it contained: such and such is the true meaning.' He realizes then that nothing may be added to nor taken from the words of the Torah. Then he realizes that the simple sense of the Torah opens up with all its hidden implications, no single letter being superfluous or lacking. Therefore men should pursue after the Torah, studying it with great precision, so that they may become her lovers, as has been described."⁵

This remarkable passage, saturated with the atmosphere of medieval knightly tradition, is an excellent exposition of the short statement in the *Midrash Hane'elam* on Ruth quoted before. It uses precisely the same terminology but substitutes the generally used term *peshat*, the term for literal or simple meaning, in place of *ma'aseh*, fact. A further step is taken

5. Zohar II, 99 a/b, translation based upon Simon and Sperling, Vol. 3, pp. 301-2. A penetrating and beautiful essay on the history of this parable in later Kabbalistic literature is found in F. Lachover, *Al gebul ha-yashan we-he-hadash* (Jerusalem, 1951), pp. 29-78.

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in another passage (III, fol. 202 a), where the different layers expressly appear as parts of the organism of the Torah as the tree of life. Here, however, the old term *haggadah* is replaced by the new term *remez*, which in Medieval Hebrew parlance (under Arab influence) stands as a technical term for allegory. Here, also, in addition to these four layers of meaning, a fifth one is listed, that of numerological interpretation, *gematria*.

At this stage, the author had not yet hit upon a concise formula into which he could condense the whole idea. The above quotations from the Zohar were written between 1280 and 1286. Moses de Leon, however, after having completed the main part of the Zohar in pseudepigraphical garb, composed after the year 1286 a series of Kabbalistic works in Hebrew under his own name. In these he frequently gives further development to ideas first expounded in the Zohar. We know that before 1290 he composed a book called *Pardes* (literally, Paradise). This title is based upon a pun which later acquired great popularity and widest distribution in Hebrew literature. There is the famous Talmudic story of the four sages who dabbled in esoteric studies in the second century and of whom it is said in this connection "Four entered Paradise" (*Pardes*). These four were R. Akiba, Ben Zoma, Ben Azzai, and Aher. One looked and died, another looked and was struck, a third cut down the young plantings (i.e. became an apostate). Only R. Abiba entered in peace and left in peace." The precise meaning of the term *pardes* used in this story always intrigued speculative minds and I need not discuss here what was its true meaning in its original context in the Talmud. What counts for us is that Moses de Leon was the first to read this highly suggestive term as an abbreviation for the four layers of meaning in the Torah: *Peshat* (literal sense), *Remez* (allegorical sense), *Derush* (Talmudic and aggadic interpretation) *Sod* (mystic meaning). The *pardes* into which the four ancient rabbis entered came to mean speculations about the inner meaning of the Torah in all these four ways. It was combined by Moses de Leon himself in another book not long after with the idea of the nut, its shells and kernel. When sometime later on between 1295 and 1305, an anonymous author, probably a pupil or a member of Moses de Leon's circle, composed the latest parts of the Zoharic literature, namely the two works *Ra'ya Mehemna* ("The True Shepherd") and *Sepher Hatikkunim* (a book comprising seventy arrangements of interpretation to the first section of the Torah), he incorporated this new formula *pardes*, from which sources it later became generally known.

Commenting on the four rivers in Genesis flowing out of Paradise, he

gives a new twist to the old Talmudic story of the four who entered “Paradise”: One entered the river Pishon, which is to be understood as *pī shōnē halākhōt* (“one who gives the precise meaning of the halakha,” meaning here the literal sense, *peshat*). The second came into the river Gihon, which is interpreted as being composed of two words *had kal* (precise and swift), pointing to the sharp and swift expressions of Talmudic *derasha* (interpretation). The fourth entered the river Perat (Euphrates), interpreted to refer to the inner most kernel, the seed of life, which always bubbles forth new mysteries of meaning. Ben Zoma and Ben Azzai entered only the shells and thinner coverings of the Torah, and became entangled there, not being able to find their way. Only Rabbi Akiba penetrated into the kernel.”⁶ The author of the *Ra’ya Mehemna* has made a still further change in the terminology. He uses the formula *pardes* in three additional passages, perhaps written somewhat later than the above quotation. He substitutes the term *re’iyot* (insights) for the *remez* (allegory).⁷

The author of the *Tikunim* identifies the Shekhina, the presence of God conceived as the last emanation or *Sephira* among the ten *Sephirot*, with the Torah in its full manifestation, comprising the fullness of all its meanings and all its layers of meaning. He could therefore say that the Shekhina is called the “Pardes of the Torah” (*Tikunim* in *Zohar Hadash*, fol. 102 d), and, in the same way as Moses de Leon, could combine this with the motif of the nut: “The Shekhina in exile is called *pardes* (namely, clothed in the four layers of meaning), but She Herself is the innermost kernel. This is why we call Her nut, and this is what King Solomon said when he entered the Paradise of mystical speculation ‘I went down to the garden of nuts’ ” (*Canticles* 6:11).⁸ The precise meaning of the Shekhina in exile in this context will become clearer at a later point. Moses de Leon, in his *Book of the Rational Soul*, composed in 1290, connects the principle of *pardes* with the first principle discussed above, namely that of the whole Torah as the name of God. He says: “I composed a book with the name of *Pardes* in the mystery of the four ways to explain His precise Name. This is what is meant by the saying that four entered the *pardes*, which is nothing but *peshat*, *remez*, *derasha*, *sod*. In this book I commented on all these

6. *Zohar*, I, 26 b. The passage actually forms part of the *Tikunim*.

7. It seems to me that this reading *re’iyoth* is to be preferred to that of *re’ayath* (proofs, furnished by the interpretation) which does not fit into the given context. Bacher’s conjecture that *re’ayoth* is but a corruption in our editions of the correct term *remez*, is refuted by the fact that the same interpretation of *pardes* is found in two other passages which escaped his attention, *Zohar hadash*, fols. 102 d and 107 c. (These passages are parts of the *Tikunei Zohar*.)

8. *Tikunim*, no. 24.

matters in connection with the mystery of the tales and facts related in the Torah in order to show that all of them refer mystically to the eternal life, and that there is nothing which is not contained in the mystery of His Name.”⁹

The same basic principle of the fourfold explanation is used consistently by Bahya ben Asher in his voluminous commentary on the Torah, composed around 1291 in Saragossa. Bahya does not use the term *remez*, but calls this allegorical method of interpretation, which with him is identical with interpretation according to the principles of medieval philosophy, by the name *derekh hā sekhel* (“the rational or intellectual way”). The catchword *pardes*, however had not yet reached him, although in some of his explanations he shows that he had knowledge of several sections of the main part of the Zohar, published just at the time he started writing his commentary.

Still another way of portraying four layers of meaning is to be found in some fragmentary explanations to Maimonides’ *Guide of the Perplexed*, perhaps correctly attributed to Joseph Gikatila. These were composed, at any rate, in the last part of the thirteenth century. He says: “The Torah can be explained in *three* ways, or even more.” He calls these ways *perush*, *be^{ur}*, *peshet* and *derash*. *Perush* for him means the precise grammatical sense, analogous to what above was called *peshat*. *Peshet* refers to some kind of deeper penetration into the literal sense. *Derash* comprises for him both the Talmudic method of deducing the halakha from Scripture as well as allegory. The mystical sense is called by him *be^{ur}*. Literally, this word means no more than explanation, but by a mystical play on words characteristic of the Kabbalists it is connected with *be^{ur}*, the well, for the Torah is likened to a well of living waters which continuously brings forth fresh powers. A very similar idea occurs in the *Ra^{ya} Mehemna* whose author has read at least some of Gikatila’s earlier writings. There we have the idea of the Torah as an inexhaustible well, which no pitcher (*kad*) can ever exhaust. The pitcher has the numerical value of twenty-four, and thus indicates that even the twenty-four books of the Hebrew Bible cannot fully exhaust the essential mystical Torah, the hidden Divine Being manifested through the Biblical books.¹⁰

This fourfold aspect of the Torah is strongly reminiscent of the similar ideas developed by early medieval Christian writers like Bede the Vener-

9. Moses de Leon, *Sepher ha-nepesh ha-hakkamah* (1608), near the end.

10. Zohar, II, 114 b, and Gikatila’s commentaries published in the second part of Saul Cohen’s questions to Isaac Abarbanel (Venice, 1574), fol. 21 a.

able (in the early eighth century), and who had a great vogue among Christian writers in later medieval times. The Christian writers spoke about history, allegory tropology (which to them meant moral interpretation), and anagogia (meaning mostly eschatological interpretation). What the Kabbalist writers would have called the mystical sense of Scripture could properly be included sometimes under the heading of allegory and at other times under that of anagogy. Well-known are the medieval Latin hexameters composed in the early fourteenth century by Nicolas of Lyra:

*Litera gesta docet, quid credas, allegoria
Moralis quid agas, quo tendas, anagogia.*

Should we assume a historic connection between the Christian and Kabbalistic conceptions in this respect? This has been a matter of controversy. Bacher, in his aforementioned essay, has assumed such a connection, whereas a recent writer, Perez Sandler, has tried to make a case for independent development of the Kabbalistic doctrine of *pardes*.¹¹ I would rather tend to agree with Bacher, although there could be of course the possibility that the four meanings were arrived at without outside influence by spitting up allegory into the two different aspects of philosophical and theosophical interpretation. But in the given circumstances, where the idea appears in Christian Spain in three books exactly at the same time, and given the fact that these writers adhere to a theory of four layers even though they are not consistent among themselves about their exact division, it seems that they must have formed a definite idea of *four* such ways. The Zoharic explanation of these is certainly surprisingly like the Christian formula. Gikatila, on the other hand, would have had no sufficient reason to introduce a differentiation between two ways of literal sense unless he had some previous interest in a fourfold aspect of the Torah.¹²

The crystallization of the idea of the four layers in the hierarchical organism of the Torah was not the only thesis the Zohar had to offer in this respect. There is another thesis that every word, nay every letter, has

11. P. Sandler, *Le ba'yath Pardes*, in the El Auerbach Jubilee volume (Jerusalem, 1955), pp. 222, 235.

12. It is worth while noting that the affinity of the Kabbalistic theory with that developed in Christian tradition had been already observed by Pico della Mirandola, the first Christian humanist who dealt extensively with Kabbalah. In his *Apologia*, composed in 1487, he says: "Just as there exists in our midst a fourfold way of expounding the Bible, the literal, the mystical or allegorical, the tropological and the anagogy, so, too, is it among the Hebrews. The literary sense is called among them *peshat*, the allegorical *midrash*, the tropological is

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seventy aspects (literally, “faces”). This is a principle not original with the Kabbalists. It is found in the late *Midrash Numeri Rabbah* (13. 15), being quoted already by the famous Bible commentator Abraham ibn Ezra (twelfth century) in his introduction to his commentary on the Torah. Although not found in the Talmud, it is in a way a development of a Talmudic motive. Seventy is the traditional number of the nations inhabiting the face of the earth. The Talmud states that every commandment that went out of the mouth of God at the Revelation on Mount Sinai divided itself and could be heard in all the seventy languages (B. Shabbat 88 b). The transition from this statement to the later statement about seventy aspects can be clearly seen in a passage of the *Alphabet of Rabbi Akiba*, a half-mystical treatise of the early post-Talmudic period, to which no real attention has been paid in connection with our problem. Here we read: “And all the treasures of wisdom are handed over to the angelic prince of wisdom Segan-zagael, and all were opened up to Moses on Sinai so that he was taught during the forty days he spent there the Torah in the seventy aspects of the seventy languages.”¹³ Later the seventy languages were dropped, and the new formula was thus formed. The Zohar quotes it lavishly. The several aspects are the mysteries to be detected in every word: “Many lights shine within every word” (III, 202 a). The meaning of the holy text cannot be exhausted by any given number of them, and the number seventy here, of course, stands for the inexhaustible totality of the Divine words. The light, moreover, and the mystery of the Torah are one, for the Hebrew word *’or* has the same numerical value as *raz*. When God said “Let there be light,” he referred to the mystery shining in the Torah, as the author of the *Midrash Hane’elam* puts it.¹⁴

A striking application of this idea was made with regard to the Book Zohar itself by the famous Kabbalist Hayyim Vital (d. 1620). The name Zohar literally means Splendor. According to him, the splendor of the Divine light which shines in the Torah is reflected in its mysteries. When

called *sekhel*, and the most sublime and Divine among all of them” (*Opera*, ed. Basle, p. 178–79). The Hebrew terms are exactly those used by Bahya ben Asher, whose book must therefore have served as Pico’s source for the statement. The erroneous identification of *midrash* with allegory and of *sekhel*, which actually represents allegory, with tropology points to the limits of Pico’s knowledge of these sources. This mistaken identification is amplified in the *Apologia* which the Franciscan monk Archangelus de Bourgonova wrote for Pico. He lists midrashic literature under the heading of allegory, but books like those of Maimonides and Gersonides among the tropological.

13. *Othioth de-rabbi Akiba*, ed. Wertheimer (1914), p. 12.

14. Zohar I, 140 a; *Zohar hadash*, fol. 8 b.

these mysteries, however, put on the literal dress of the Talmudists, they became dark. The literal sense of the Torah is the darkness, but the Kabbalistic sense, the mystery, is the “Zohar” shining in every line of Scripture.¹⁵

This deprecation of the literal meaning in its simple sense is not novel with the later Kabbalists. It is already stressed in some quite outspoken passages in the Zohar itself: “Rabbi Simeon said: Woe to the man who regards the Torah as a book of mere tales and profane matters. If that were so, we could compose even in our day a Torah dealing with profane matters and of far greater excellence. As for worldly matters, even the princes of the world possess books of greater worth which we could use as a model for composing some such Torah. The Truth is that the Torah contains in all its words supernal truths and sublime mysteries. . . . Had the Torah not clothed Herself in the garments of this world, the world could not endure it. The stories of the Torah are thus only Her outer garments, and whoever looks upon that garment as being the Torah itself, woe to that man:—such a one will have no portion in the next world. The garments worn by a man are the most visible part of him, and foolish people looking at the man do not seem to see more in him than the garments. In truth, however, the pride of the garments is the body of the man, and the pride of the body is the soul. Similarly, the Torah has a body made up of the precepts of the Torah called *gufe Torah* (‘bodies of the Torah’), and that body is enveloped in garments made up of stories of a worldly character. The foolish people only see the garment, which are the stories. Those who are somewhat wiser penetrate as far as the body, but the really wise, the servants of the supernal king, those who stood on Mount Sinai, do not pay regard except to the soul, which is the root-principle of the whole Torah. In the future, the same are destined to regard even the innermost soul on the Torah.” The Torah, the author adds, needs an outer garment of stories and narratives just as wine cannot be kept save in a jar. But it behoves to penetrate beneath them.¹⁶

The last and most radical step in developing this principle of the infinite meaning of the Torah was taken in the later Kabbalism that flourished in the Palestinian school of Safed in the sixteenth century. Here we find the idea that the general totality of the souls of Israel, according to the traditional number leaving Egypt and receiving the Torah at Sinai, numbers

15. Vital, *Etz ha-da'ath* (Zolkiew, 1871), fols. 46–47.

16. Zohar III, 152 a; translation based on Simon and Sperling, vol. 5 (1934), pp. 211–12.

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600,000. "Now the Torah of the souls of Israel. Therefore, a corresponding number of 600,000 aspects and meanings is found in the Torah. Out of every single aspect of these 600,000 a special root of a soul in Israel has been fashioned. In times to come, every single one in Israel will read and know the Torah in accordance to that explanation which is singular to his root, from which he was created. This is also the way the souls in Paradise conceive of the Torah."¹⁷

The mystical idea that there is a peculiar way in which each single soul reads the Torah is already stressed by Moses Cordovero of Safed, who says that every one of the 600,000 holy souls has his own special portion in the Torah, "and no one other than he whose soul stems from there would be permitted to conceive that peculiar and individual understanding reserved to him."¹⁸ The Kabbalists of Safed developed out of the Zohar an additional idea that in some mysterious way the Torah which actually contains only about 340,000 letters contained mystically 600,000. Thus everyone in Israel has a letter in the mystical Torah to which his soul is bound and views the Torah in his individual way. Menahem Azariah of Fano says in his *Treatise of the Soul* that the Torah as it was originally engraved on the first tablets contained those 600,000 letters, and only after these were broken was the Torah given in its more restricted scope, which by some secret processes of letter combinations still points to the original number of 600,000 letters comprising the mystical body of the Torah.¹⁹

V

We have come to know three basic principles which may be said to govern the general outlook of the Kabbalists on the Torah. There is more, however, to this. In some Kabbalistic writings, a new turn is given to these ideas, giving them an even more daring aspect. Their common point of departure is twofold, arising out of two questions which came quite naturally to a pious and speculatively-minded Jew: 1) What would have been the content of the Torah, considered a supernal manifestation of Divine wisdom, had the fall of man not occurred? Stated even more radically, if the Torah was pre-existent, what was the way in which it

17. Luria, *Sepher ha-Kawwanoth* (Venice, 1620), fol. 53 b; more on this in Vital's *Sha'ar gilgulim*, ch. 17 (Jerusalem, 1912), fol. 17 b, and in Nathan Shapira's *Megalleh 'Amukkoth* (1637), ch. 9.

18. Cordovero, *Derishah be-'inyanei mal'akhim*, ed. Margolioth (1945), p. 70.

19. *Ma'amar ha-nephesh* (Pjetkov, 1903), III, § 6, fol. 17 a, *Ma'mar*.

was constituted before the fall of Man? 2) What will be the structure of the Torah in the time of Redemption when man will be restored to his pristine state? As a matter of fact, these two questions are really one, namely, the relation of the Torah to the essential history of man. It is small wonder that this question has deeply intrigued some Kabbalists, and that their ideas on it have found broad resonance throughout Kabbalistic literature, wielding strong influence on the later development of Jewish mysticism, both in its more orthodox as well as in its heretical aspects.

Although the author of the main part of the Zohar did not himself raise questions of this kind, they were very much in the mind of his younger contemporary who wrote the *Ra'ya Mehemna* and the *Tikunei Zohar*. Two sets of ideas relevant in this connection are to be found in his books. According to him, there are two aspects of the Torah, the one called *Torah de-beri'ah* ("the Torah in the state of Creation"), and the other *Torah d'atziluth* ("Torah in the state of emanation"). The latter is characterized by the phrase of the Psalmist, "The Torah of the Lord is perfect," meaning that it is self-contained in its Divine character. The *Torah de-beri'ah*, however, is characterized by the phrase from Proverbs (8) "God created me at the beginning of this way." This is the Torah as it appears where God leaves the recesses of His being and is manifested in His created worlds.²⁰ In another passage he says: "There is a Torah to which the term Creation does not apply, but which is His Emanation." Only with regard to this *Torah d'atziluth* can it be said that He and She are one.²¹ The author does not develop this motive very much further, but in a third passage the connection of this double terminology with the second set of ideas developed by him in much greater length becomes apparent. Here we read that the *Torah de-beri'ah* is the outward garment of the Shekhinah.²² If man had not been destined to sin, the Shekhinah could have remained without covering. But now she is in need of such, like one who must conceal his poverty. Therefore, whoever sins now is like one who strips the Shekhinah of her garments, but he who performs the commandments of the Torah is like one who clothes the Shekhinah in her garments. It appears from this statement that what he calls *Torah de-beri'ah* is the Torah in its actual state of manifestation and as understood by Talmudic tradition, a Torah containing positive and negative command-

20. *Tikunei Zohar*, preface, fol. 6 b.

21. *Ibid.*, no. 22, fol. 64 a.

22. Zohar, I, 23 a/b, belonging to the *Tikumim*.

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ments, and which draws a clear line of demarcation between good and evil, clean and unclean, holy and profane, permitted and prohibited. This idea of the garments of the Torah reappears in these latest Zoharic writings in a great many passages, based upon the identification of the Shekhinah or Queen (Matrona) with the Torah as revealed to Man. Frequently it is said that the color of her garments after the fall of man, and more particularly during the period of Exile, is black, symbolizing her state of mourning. For the author, however, this dark clothing stands for the literal meaning (*peshat*). So, for instance, the *Ra'ya Mehemna* speaking about the Matrona being the Torah, says that the righteous man by his merits and good deeds brightens up the Shekhinah, "stripping Her of the somber garments of literalism and casuistry and adorning Her with brightly colored garments which are the mysteries of the Torah."²³ What is treated here as two types of garments, one representing the factual and pragmatic aspect, the other the contemplative and mystic, appears in many other passages under a different symbolism. We have already seen that the Torah was likened to a tree in Paradise. But there were, alas, two trees in Paradise, both of them pointing to two different spheres in the Divine realm. The one which was the tree of life was identified by the Kabbalists, even before the Zohar, with the written Torah, whereas the second, the tree of knowledge of good and evil, was identified with the Oral Torah. The written Torah, of course, refers principally to the absolute character of the Torah, whereas the Oral Torah is concerned with the ways and means the Torah is applied in our world. This is not so paradoxical as it may seem at first sight. To the Kabbalist the written Torah is indeed, as I have said before, an *absolutum* which in itself cannot be understood fully and directly by the human mind. It is tradition which makes the Torah understandable by delineating the ways and means of its application to Jewish life. For an orthodox Jew—and let us not forget again that the Kabbalists were consciously orthodox Jews—the written Torah alone, without the Oral Torah which is tradition, would be open to all kinds of heretical misinterpretation. It is the Oral Law that governs the conduct of the world of Judaism. It is easy to see how the equation of the Oral Torah with the Kabbalistic conception of the Shekhinah, seen as the Divine power governing and manifested in the community of Israel, came about.

The author of the *Ra'ya Mehemna* and the *Tikunim* gave a new turn to

23. Zohar, III, 215 b (*Ra'ya Mehemna*).

this symbolism. The tree of knowledge of good and evil suggests to him that sphere of the Torah which demarcates good from evil, pure from the impure, and so on. But it also suggests to him the power which evil can hold over good in the time of sin, and especially of exile. The tree of knowledge is the tree of limitations, prohibitions, and demarcations, whereas the tree of life is the tree of freedom, pointing not to duality, but to the unity of Divine life, unfettered by limitations, by the power of death, and all the other negative aspects which made their appearance in the world after the fall of man. We might say that the tree of life represents a Utopian aspect of the Torah. Only after the fall of man with its far-reaching consequences did the Torah take on those material and perforce limited aspects of which we have spoken. It was only a short step from here to consider the Torah under the aspect of the tree of life as the mystical Torah, and the tree of knowledge as the Torah as it is known in history. This, of course, is an excellent example of typological exegesis for which the author of the *Ra'ya Mehemna* had an outspoken predilection. But there is more to this. The author combines this duality of the trees with the duality of the two sets of the tablets given to Moses on Mt. Sinai. According to old Talmudic tradition, the venom of the serpent which had corrupted Eve, and through her all mankind, had lost its power at the time of Revelation, regaining it only after Israel had worshipped the golden calf. The Kabbalistic author interprets this in a new way. The first tablets, which were given before the sin of the golden calf occurred, came from the tree of life. The second, given after the first were broken, came from the tree of knowledge. The meaning of this is obvious. The first tablets contained a revelation of the Torah according to the original state of man, which would have been governed by the principle embodied in the tree of life. It would have been a purely spiritual Torah given to a world where everything was holy, and where the powers of uncleanness and death need not be fought against by means of prohibitions and limitations. The mystery would have been freely revealed. But that Utopian moment quickly evaporated. When the first tablets were broken, "the letters engraved on them flew away," that is to say, the spiritual element receded and is since visible only to the mystic who can still perceive them in the new clothes and outward garment which they took on in the second tablets.²⁴ These represent the Torah as a historic fact and power. It still has its hidden layers of infinite mysteries. The

24. Zohar, I, 26 b (*Tikunim*); II, 117 b, III, 124 b, 153 a, 255 a (all belonging to the *Ra'ya Mehemna*); *Tikunei Zohar*, nos. 56 and 60; *Zohar hadash*, fol. 106 c.

light is still shining through the aspect of good, whereas the aspect of evil is to be fought by all those commandments designed as a counter to it. This is the hard shell of the Torah, which, in a world governed by the power of evil, cannot be avoided. But the shell must not be taken for the whole. In the performance of the commandment, man can break through the external shell and reach the kernel. Incidentally, this may explain the somewhat ambiguous tenor of the many statements on the hierarchy of Bible, Mishnah, Talmud, and Kabbalah so abundant in the *Ra'ya Mehemna* and the *Tikunim*, which have baffled a good many readers of these texts. It would be wrong to speak of an antinomian and anti-Talmudist character of these passages.²⁵ for the author does not at all advocate the abrogation of Talmudic law, which, to him, is actually the historic form under which the Torah was given. But there can be but little doubt that in the time of redemption he looked forward to the revelation of that other Utopian and purely mystical aspect of the Torah of which I have spoken. The essential nature of the Torah is but one; it is that embodied in the concept of a *Torah d'atzilut*. But the aspect which it has taken on in a world in which it is necessary to fight the power of sin is a perfectly legitimate and, moreover, necessary one. The great stress laid by the author on those somber aspects of the Torah in its Talmudic garb shows how strong was his preoccupation with the mystical Utopian vision after all. The exile of the Shekhinah which began with the fall of man takes on its fullest meaning in the historic exile of the Jewish people. This is why the two intrinsically different conceptions of sin and of exile are so frequently combined in his Kabbalistic homilies.

The Kabbalists of the school of Safed in the sixteenth century developed this idea in a most interesting way. They tried to answer the questions of the character of the Torah before the fall of man and how this original structure could be reconciled with the concrete Torah of history. Excellent formulations of these ideas are to be found in the writings of Moses Cordovero (d. 1570) from where they were taken over by many other writers. He states²⁶ that the Torah in its innermost being is composed of Divine letters which are nothing but configurations of Divine light.

25. This was how H. Groetz in his "History of the Jews" understood them. A much deeper insight into the meaning of these statements has been gained by I. F. Baer's essay, "The Historical Background of the *Ra'ya Mehemna*, a chapter in the history of the religious-social movements in Castile during the 13th century" which appeared in Hebrew in the historical quarterly review *Zion*, vol. 5 (1940), pp. 1-44. Here the connection of these ideas with the Joachite movement of the Franciscan *spirituales* has been first brought to light.

26. Moses Cordovero, *Shi'ur Komah*, Warsaw, 1883, fol. 63 b.

Only in subsequent stages of progressing materialization do these letters combine in different ways. At first they form names, later they form appellations and derivatives, and still later these are combined in a new way to make words relating of worldly happenings and material things. Just as our present world acquired its crudely material character only as a consequence of the fall of man, so, too, did the Torah put on its material character in strict parallel to this change. The spiritual letters became material when the material character of the world required it. From this hypothesis, Cordovero answered the two questions: what was the nature of the Torah before the fall of man and what will it be like in Messianic times?

He illustrates his point by reference to the prohibition of wearing a mixture of wool and linen, called *sha'atnez*: "When the Torah says (Deut. 22:11): Thou shalt not wear *sha'atnez*, it could not have had application before Adam put on this base material clothing mystically called "skin of the serpent." The Torah, therefore, could not have contained this prohibition, for what connection does the spiritual soul garbed in a purely spiritual garment have to *sha'atnez*? Indeed, what was originally found in the combinations of the letters of the Torah before the fall of man was not *sha'atnez tzemeru-pishtim* but the same consonants in another combination, *satan az metzar u-tophsim*, the meaning of which was a warning to Adam not to exchange his garment of light for the garment of the serpent's skin symbolizing the demoniac powers called *satan az*. Further, these powers would certainly entail trouble and anguish to man, and would take possession of him (*ve-tofsim*), bringing him down to Hell. What brought about this change in the combination of the letters so that we now read *sha'atnez tzemer v'pishim*? Because when he put on the serpent's skin his being became material and required a Torah giving material commandments and a corresponding reading of the letters to convey such commandments. This applies as well in the same manner to all the other commandments based upon the corporeal and material nature of man."²⁷

The same source deals with the eschatological aspect of the same problem: "This is the meaning of the new interpretations of the Torah which God will reveal in time to come. For the Torah is always the same, except that at the beginning she took on the form of material combinations of letters, suitable for this material world, but in the time to come when men

27. Abraham Azulai, *Hesed le'Abraham* (1685), II, para. 27. The author made frequent use of a manuscript of Cordovero's work, *Elimah*, from which many of his most interesting statements have been drawn.

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will put off this material body of theirs and will be transfigured and attain that mystical body which was Adam's before he sinned. Then they will understand the mystery of the Torah when its hidden side will become revealed. And later, when man will be transfigured into an even more spiritual being, after the end of the sixth millennium (meaning after the Messianic redemption and the beginnings of the new aeon), he will understand ever-deeper layers of the mystery of the Torah in its hidden essence. Then every man will be able to discern the wonderful contents of the Torah and the secret combinations of its letters, through which he will understand much of the secret essence of the world. . . . For the basic principle in this exposition is that the Torah has taken on a material garment like man himself. And when man will ascend from his material garment (namely his bodily state) to a more subtle one, so, too, will the Torah be transfigured from its material appearance, and will be conceived in its spiritual essence in ever-deeper degrees. The hidden faces of the Torah will glow and the righteous will study them. But in all these stages the Torah will always be the same which it was at the beginning, remaining forever without changing."²⁸

This speculation combines in a very illuminating manner the orthodox insistence on the never-changing and absolute character of the Torah with its relativization in connection with the ways it is seen in the different periods of history. The same principle was applied to the way the Torah would be conceived in the higher hierarchies of being. The later Kabbalists spoke of four worlds forming such a spiritual hierarchy, the world of Divine emanation (*atzilut*), the world of creation (*beriah*), the world of formation (*yetzirah*), and the world of activation (*asiyah*). These worlds do not follow each other in time, but coexist, forming the different stages through which the creative power of God materializes. A revelation of His being must perforce have come to all of them, and as a matter of fact we learn several things about its structure. Thus texts originating in the school of Israel Saruk develop the following idea: In the highest world of *atzilut* the Torah was but an arrangement of all the combinations of the consonants forming the Hebrew alphabet. This was the primeval garment which originated and was spun out of the inner movement of joy which *Ensof*, the Infinite and Transcendent Hidden God, produced when first contemplating revealing His power. Here the Torah is found in its innermost elements, which in their primeval order contain the possibilities of

²⁸ *Ibid.*, II, para. 11, undoubtedly copied from the same source. Similar passages occur in Cordovero's published books, e.g., in *Shi'ur Komah*, fol. 85 d.

everything. Only in the second world does this Torah take on the appearance of a sequence of holy names of God, formed through a certain manner of combination of the elements which were present in the *atzilut*—world. In the third world the Torah appears as a unit of angelic names and powers, in accordance with the law of this third world, which is populated by angelic beings. Only in the fourth and last world could the Torah appear as it does to us.²⁹ The laws governing the inner order of each one of these worlds are revealed in the particular form in which the Torah appears in all these four worlds. The reason why we do not immediately perceive of the Torah in this capacity is of course because this aspect of it was hidden through the change in its appearance after the fall of man.

I think there is no more naturalistic and drastic form in which this mystic relativization of the Torah could be expressed than the fragment from one of the writings of Eliahu Cohen Itamari of Smyrna (c. 1700), which is quoted by Joseph Hayyim Azulai from a manuscript. Rabbi Eliahu was a renowned preacher and Kabbalist of ascetic piety, although his theology is strangely tinged with ideas that originated in the heretic Kabbalism of the followers of the pseudo-Messiah Sabbathai Zevi. This fragment seeks to explain why according to rabbinic law the Torah must be written without vocalization and punctuation. According to him, this fact “is an allusion to the state of the Torah as it existed before God and prior to its being given to the lower spheres. *For there were a number of letters before Him without any definite arrangement into words as it is now, because the actual order of the words would be dependent on the way this lower world would behave.* Because of Adam’s sin, God arranged the letters before him into words which describe death and other matters such as the levirate marriage. But without sin there would have been no death. The same letters would have been arranged into words which would have told another tale. This is why the scroll of the Torah contains no vowel points and no punctuation and no accentuation, in allusion to the Torah as *originally a pile of letters without arrangement (tel shel othioth bilti mesuddaroth).* The Divine purpose shall be revealed when the Messiah will appear and swallow up death forever so that then no further application of these matters in the Torah pertaining to death, uncleanness, and so on will be necessary. For at that time God will cancel out the present combination of letters forming the words of our present Torah and will recombine letters

29. Naftali Bacharach, *Emek ha-melekh* (1648), fol. 4 a. Similar theories are developed in considerable length in many writings of the lurianic school, both in the authentic and apocryphal presentations of Luria’s doctrine.

of different words, resulting in new words telling of different matters. This is the meaning of Isaiah's words (51:4). "For a Torah will go forth from me," which was already interpreted by the ancient rabbis to mean: a new Torah shall come forth from me. Is then the Torah not eternal? The meaning is, however, that the Scroll of the Torah will be just as it is now, but God will instruct us to read it according to another order of letters, and will instruct us with regard to the division and combination of the words."³⁰ It is indeed difficult to imagine a more audacious statement of the principle involved in this theory, and it is small wonder that the pious Rabbi Hayim Joseph Azulai protested his horror against such radical interpretation. Curiously enough, he relies on Nahmanides' doctrine on the character of the primordial Torah in contradistinction to Eliahu Cohen's, which, as he says, as long as it does not prove to be authentic rabbinic tradition, has no validity for him. He did not see, apparently, the continuous line of development which led from the original conception found in Nahmanides to the ultimate logical consequence formulated by Eliahu Cohen. At any rate, it seems highly significant that a rabbi of recognized standing and great moral authority could accept such a radical conclusion as we have here, where an utterly spiritualistic and Utopian conception of the nature of the new Messianic Torah could be given a dogmatic foundation in a widely accepted principle.

It is even more remarkable that a formula very similar to Eliahu Cohen's was ascribed to Israel Ba'al Shem, the founder of the new Hasidic movement in Poland and Russia, in an early work coming from the circle of his younger contemporary and friend, R. Pinhas of Koretz.³¹

"Indeed the truth is that the Holy Torah was created at first only in *an incoherent mixture of letters*. By this is meant that all the letters found in our Holy Torah from the first words in Genesis till the last ones in Deuteronomy were not joined together to form the words we read there now, like 'In the beginning He created,' or 'Go thee from thy land,' and similarly. The truth is that all these letters of our Holy Torah were mixed together, and only when something happened in the world did these letters combine into words to tell the story of this event. Thus, when the creation of the world took place and the story of Adam and Eve took place, the letters drew near one to another to form the words telling of this story. Or when someone or another died, the letters combined to read

30. Azulai, *Devash le-phi* (Livorno, 1801), fol. 50 a.

31. The passage is first quoted in the collection *Ge'ullath Israel* (Ostrog, 1821), fol. 1d, 2 a.

'and so and so died.' So was it, too, with other things, when the event took place, instantly the letter combinations formed in accordance with the happening. Had different events taken place, the letters would of necessity have formed different combinations, for the Holy Torah is the wisdom of the Blessed God, and has no limits, and know you that."

Finally, it is also worth noting that this rather naturalistic doctrine on the original nature of the Torah reminds us very much of Democritus' theory of the atoms. The Greek term *stoicheion*, as well known, has the double meaning of "letter" and "element" or "atom." The different qualities of objects are to be explained, according to him, by the different movements of the same atoms. The parallel between the letters as elements of the linguistic world and the atoms as elements of reality has already been elaborated by Greek philosophers. When Aristotle put the idea in its succinct form: "It is the same letters from which tragedy and comedy originate,"³² he expressed the principle that recurs in this Kabbalistic theory of the Torah: the same letters in different combinations produce the different aspects of the universe.

VI

We have spoken of the principle of the relativization of the absolute Torah in its different manifestations through the essentially different periods of history. This principle has received an even wider application of a quite different character in another doctrine. This is the doctrine of the *shemitot* or cosmic cycles, a theory which, although not accepted by the authors of the Zohar, and therefore glossed over by them in silence, nevertheless occupied an important place, especially in the older Kabbalah, wielding a considerable influence even upon some later developments of Jewish mysticism. This doctrine found its classical formulation in a unique work which itself served as a source for an entire group of literature. This is the *Sepher Hatemunah*, the ambiguous title of which can be translated both as "The Book of Configuration" as well as the "Book of the Image." It is literary in its construction; it is a mystical exposition of the form of the Hebrew letters as configurations of Divine forces. These letters form at the same time, however, the mystic image of God as it appears in the world of the Sephirot. The book, the author of which remains unknown, was written in Catalonia some time around 1250. Al-

32. Aristoteles, *De generatione et corruptione*, 315 b, as an addition to his summing-up of Democritus' teaching.

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though the general principles of his doctrine are quite distinct and clear, its details are often difficult to grasp. The author chose to write in an enigmatic style full of Biblical associations and connotations that conceals more than it reveals. It would really be impossible to grasp the meaning of many passages were it not for the excellent paraphrase of the text found in a very ancient commentary, undoubtedly written one, or at most two, generations later by a Spanish Kabbalist who must have had at his disposal very good tradition as to the meaning of the book.

The doctrine as expounded in the Book *Temunah* constitutes in some ways a very interesting parallel to the teachings of Joachim of Floris, which, though formulated in southern Italy two generations earlier, has no historical connection with the Kabbalistic teaching. It is well known that Joachim proceeded from the assumption that just as the hidden power of Divinity expressed itself in Trinity, such Trinitarian rhythm was to be found in the three different cycles of the history of creation, in each one of which a different Person of Christian Trinity is dominant. Divinity reveals itself therefore in all its fullness through the totality of the three periods in history succeeding one another. The period of the Father is the world of the Old Testament or the rule of the Torah of Moses. The period of the Son brought the reign of Grace expressed through the Gospel and represented by the Catholic Church. The third period, whose arrival was considered imminent, would inaugurate the reign of the Holy Spirit in which all externals would be abrogated and the mystical content of the Gospels would become revealed.

In contradistinction to this doctrine in which the three periods of history expressing the Trinitarian structure of Divinity are placed within a single cosmic unity of the created universe and its history, the doctrine of the Book *Temunah* proceeds from a different conception. It teaches likewise that the hidden power of Divinity, which to the Kabbalists of course means the Sefirot, strives by its very nature to be expressed in the history of the universe. But this expression takes on another form. There is a sequence of different creations in each of which one of the various Sefirot is predominant. The creative power of every Sefira must find its complete actualization by prevailing over a cosmic unit whose law of being is regulated by the peculiar nature of this Sefira. A distinction, however, was made here between the three highest Sefirot and the seven lower ones. The three higher ones remain hidden and are not externally expressed in Creation. They did not build any worlds of their own, or, if they did, such worlds remained unknown even to the Kabbalist. It is only the seven

lower Sephirot, or Attributes of God, each one representing one of the seven days of Creation, which found their expression in a particular cosmic cycle of creation. Such a cycle constitutes a complete universe created from chaos and exists for seven thousand years, following which it returns to chaos, only to be rebuilt by the active power of the Sephira following in the hierarchy of Emanation.

Since the early Kabbalists found support for this doctrine in the Biblical prescription of a Sabbatical year (Deut., ch. 15), they called every such cosmic cycle by the name of *Shemittah*. Every one of the seven days of Creation was considered as corresponding to one thousand years, "a day of God." Equally, every year of the seven years forming the years of the cosmic *Shemittah* represents one thousand years. At the end of the seventh millennium which is the cosmic Sabbath, the world becomes void of living creatures and chaotic. Seven such cycles are therefore required to reveal the full cosmic power of Creation. At the conclusion of 49,000 years, in the Great Jubilee of the fiftieth millenium, all reality returns to its source in the world of Emanation. This follows the pattern of the Jubilee year prescribed by the Torah, whereby in the fiftieth year liberty is proclaimed throughout the land and everything returns to its original estate. It is easy to see that this theory is connected with earlier speculations which have had a long history both in oriental religion and Platonic philosophy. The teachings of the Ismailitic sect in Persia represent a very close analogy to the Kabbalistic theory, although the historic channels that may have connected them both are not yet explored.

The Book *Temunah*³³ gives a detailed analysis of this doctrine which is organically bound up with a mystical approach to the problem of the Torah with which we are concerned. There exists a higher Torah called the primordial Torah. This Torah is the Divine wisdom comprising within itself all processes of being in absolute spirituality. The letters of this primordial Torah were spiritually traced and were very subtle and hidden, "without form, figure, and boundary." Only in the next stage of Emanation is a differentiation introduced between these letters which at first formed an indistinct unity. Since a different pattern of Sephiratic influence predominates in every *Shemittah*, in accordance with the particular nature of each, no single *Shemittah* can reveal the full content of the power of God as it was expressed in His primordial wisdom. What was unfolded and engraved in a non-temporal way in God's wisdom had to unfold during

33. The best edition is the second one, Lwów, 1892.

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the temporal periods of cosmic creation and the historical processes of the different *Shemittoth*. Each *Shemittah* thus reveals one aspect of the Divine purpose laid down in the primordial Torah. Therefore, the particular inner law of each individual *Shemittah* finds expression in a revelation of an aspect of the Torah which is all its own. We can speak of the Torah of a given *Shemittah* without assuming a change of essence in the primordial Torah in which the different spiritual patterns of the *Shemittoth* are embodied. These different patterns simply become revealed in differing combinations and forms which constitute the letters of the Torah, their arrangement, and their division into words which all change from one cosmic cycle to the other. The thesis that there exists one absolute Torah which has an all-embracing and higher mystical being serves, therefore, as justification for its completely changing expressions in the various *Shemittahs*. The fundamental principle of the absolute and Divine character of the Torah is preserved, but in an interpretation which permits a completely new approach. The connection of this idea with the various conceptions expounded before is obvious, but so is the difference. It is not within the one unit between creation and redemption that the Torah changes in its aspects, but in the changing cycles of cosmic history.

What was said before about the change in the aspect of the Torah brought about by the fall of man as well as about its Utopian aspect in the period of Redemption appears in this doctrine in another and even more radical form. The author of the Book Temunah speaks in a general way about all the seven *Shemittahs* of our Jubilee. He is quite naturally fascinated by three of them. For it should be observed that according to him we are presently living in the second cycle of cosmic history. He is therefore interested in the *Shemittah* preceding ours as well as in that expected to follow. The character of the remaining *Shemittoth* and their particular Torahs remains rather blurred. The first *Shemittah* preceding our world was created by the power of *Hesed* (Grace or Loving Kindness). This world resembled somewhat the golden age of myth. It was a world of pure light. Everything was simple in its structure and not composed of the four elements as now. Man belonged to the highest spiritual rank and had a purified spiritual body. As a matter of fact, men were more or less what the angels are now. Even cattle and beasts then were on the level of the beasts of the Divine chariot, the *Merkabah* in our present world. Since the bodies and the souls did not undergo transmigration, and since there was no evil desire and no tempting serpent, their Torah too did not contain anything regarding limitation, prohibition, and uncleanness. The

primordial Torah was revealed then entirely under the aspect of Grace.

In contradistinction to this, our *aeon* expresses the Divine attribute of rigidity and severe judgment, *Din*. It is a world of limitations, of impurity and demonic forces, all of which are but the outcome of that process inaugurated by the principle of vigorous judgment. This our world is "the receptacle of all the dregs." No wonder gold is the metal most sought after now, for its red color symbolizes the quality of judgment, in contrast to the whiteness of silver which represents grace. Everything in our world is subservient to the harsh law and discipline of this *Shemittah*. This explains the fact that various forms of exile, and even of the exile of the soul which is transmigration, are essential to its history. But this explains also the special character of its Torah which comes to show man the way to serve God within the particular framework of this *Shemittah*. The existence of good and evil, of temptation and idolatrous worship, made it necessary that the Torah should contain positive and negative commandments about what is allowed and what is prohibited, and so on. Only isolated souls have come down to this *Shemittah* from the previous ones in order to mitigate the harshness of its law, like Enoch, Abraham, and Moses. In the present cycle even the most saintly are forced to be reincarnated in animals, and this is the mystery behind the special laws regulating slaughter. The author even tells that the letters of the Torah refused to combine in this peculiar manner and to be handed over into the hands of mortals, because they foresaw the law of the *Shemittah* and objected to coming down among the "rubble," upon which the edifice of this *Shemittah* is erected. "Therefore God made a covenant with them that (even in this *Shemittah*) His Great Name would join itself inseparably with them." Therefore, even our Torah contains "in a hidden and sublime higher language" the secret regulations governing this world of our *Shemittah*. And God explained all these mysteries contained in its letters to Moses, who, according to this instruction, wrote the Torah in his own language, but followed a higher pattern in its secret arrangement.

After the nightmare, as which the author more or less sees this world of history, the coming *Shemittah* is described as a return to Utopia. In contrast to the present existing differentiations of rank and state, everything will then be on an equal level. The Torah will again be concerned only with purity and holiness, the sacrifices prescribed in its commandments will be purely spiritual and consist only of thanksgiving and love offerings. There will be no transmigration of souls and no tarnishment of either body or soul. The entire world will be in as perfect a state as was the Garden

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of Eden. The Evil Desire will have lost its drive for sin and will be transfigured. Men will hover about like the angels having converse with God. There will be a continuous state of beatific vision "without veil." Basically, this is the same vision of the Torah and its function as we found it above in the conception of the Torah coming from the "tree of life" and the state of creation corresponding to it. But the Book *Temunah* did not shrink from consequences which the author of the *Ra'ya Mehemna* either did not share or did not dare to express. The historian of religion will be impressed by the manner in which this doctrine combined strictly traditionalist adherence to the letter of the Torah given at Mt. Sinai with a vision of this same Torah changing in its appearances in the other *Shemittahs*. Here we have unequivocal Utopian antinomianism. The opinion of the author of the Book *Temunah* (fol. 62) that "what is prohibited below is permitted above" leads to the logical conclusion that things prohibited in the present *Shemittah* and according to the present reading of the Torah will become permissible or even positive commandments in another *aeon* when a different Divine attribute, for instance, Mercy instead of Judgment, will determine the structure and character of creation. Indeed, this Book, as well as some other writings following its lead, contains remarkable views concerning the appearance of the Torah in its various states of revelation, views the potential antinomian quality which it would be difficult to deny.

Two thoughts deserve special notice in this connection. The Kabbalists of this brand stated quite frequently that one letter of the Torah is missing in our particular *Shemittah*. There are two explanations of what "missing" in this connection may mean. One view—it seems that this view was shared by the author of the Book *Temunah* himself—holds that one particular letter of the alphabet is incomplete and deficient in its present form, in contrast to its completeness both in the previous *Shemittah* as well as in that to come. Since every letter in its peculiar configuration represents a concentration of Divine power, the deficiency in the now-existing form implies that the power of severe judgment predominant in our world limits the activity of the hidden lights and does not permit them to reveal themselves in their entirety. The limitations of our life show that there is something lacking which will be reintegrated only in another state of things. This deficient letter, in the opinion of these Kabbalists, is the letter *shin*, which is presently written with three heads, but which in its full form should have four, a hint of which they saw in the Talmudic prescription for engraving both types of *shin* upon the phylactery worn upon the head. But another view regarding this missing letter held that one letter is

indeed completely missing from our alphabet, not appearing at all during our *Shemittah*, and therefore is lacking in the Torah as well. The tremendous implications of such a view are obvious. The full Divine alphabet, and of course the full Torah too, was based upon a sequence of twenty-three letters, one of which has become invisible to us and will be revealed again only in the *Shemittah to come*.³⁴ Only because this particular letter vanished, do we presently read our Torah as containing negative commandments as well as positive.³⁵ Every negative aspect of Revelation is linked with this missing letter of the primordial alphabet.

The second idea basing itself upon a Talmudic passage³⁶ states that the complete Torah really contains seven books, one for each of the seven Sefirot which prevail in the seven cosmic cycles. Only during our present *Shemittah* has this heptateuch become a pentateuch because one book, that of Numbers, is considered to be made up of three. The middle one of these three has been contracted now to the point where only an allusion to it remains in a mere two verses. Joshua ibn Shu'eib, a famous Spanish rabbi of the early fourteenth century, could reconcile this view with his perfectly orthodox conviction. According to him, in the future aeon the power inherent in the Torah will expand again, and we shall perceive seven books.³⁷ The author of the Book Temunah says expressly that one book is no more seen, "for the Torah which it contained and its light which was previously shining have already departed." There is also an opinion that the first chapter of the Torah containing an allusion to a *Shemittah* completely made alight without darkness is a remnant of a fuller Torah, given to the *Shemittah*³⁸ of Grace and Loving Kindness and denied to the present one.

Within the framework of this doctrine, there undoubtedly existed various possibilities for heretical and antinomian developments of mysticism. If an unveiling of letters or books which would change the entire appearance of the Torah was considered possible without making any change in its true essence, all kinds of things could happen. At the same time, these Kabbalists took a very strong stand upon the absolute authority of our Torah during the time of our *Shemittah* and did not contemplate the possibility that such a change could be brought about without a cosmic

34. Quoted from one of the writings of the Temunah group by David ibn Zimva, *Magen David* (Amsterdam, 1713), fol. 47 b.

35. In another text of this group, Ms. Vatican. Hebr., 223, fol. 197 a.

36. In *Sabbath*, fol. 116 a.

37. Ibn Shu'eib, *Devashoth* (Krakow, 1573), fol. 63 a.

38. *Temunah*, fol. 31 a.

cataclysm linked to the emergence of a new *Shemittah*. The antinomian Utopia was left entirely to a realm of history outside our present scope. The one step that could change all of this was to establish the transition from one dominant Sefirah to another, and therefore from one *Shemittah* to a succeeding one, within historic time. It is very noteworthy that such a transition was actually envisaged by a Kabbalist of a most conservative and strictly orthodox bent, Rabbi Mordecai Yaffé in Lublin who wrote at the end of the sixteenth century. In his opinion, the present *Shemittah* began indeed at the time the Torah was given, and all the generations previous to this event belonged to the *Shemittah* of Grace.³⁹ No new creation of Heaven and Earth was necessary to effect this transition. If this opinion was debatable in the sixteenth century without anyone taking offense, we can hardly be surprised that similar ideas of an even more radical and actually subversive character made their appearance in the wake of the great Messianic outbreak that took place in the seventeenth century and was centered around the pseudo-Messiah Sabbathai Zevi and his followers. They also held that a new *Shemittah* might begin with Redemption and that the Torah governing the new aeon might actually be revealed by the Messiah, implying a radical subversion of the ancient Law.

In this connection, we should return a last time to the concept of *Torah d'atzilut*, the state of the Torah in its highest revelation, of which we spoke. This idea was known in the circle of the Book Temunah, but it was not connected there directly with the doctrine of the various aspects of the Torah in the *Shemittah*. It is said for instance that the angels received their understanding of the Torah from the *Torah of Atzilut* and taught it with all its secret implications to Moses when he ascended into Heaven to receive the Torah.⁴⁰ *Torah d'atzilut* is therefore the Torah in its pure essence or even the Torah in its Kabbalistic aspect, but not the Torah of a given aeon or *Shemittah*.

What happened in the great outbreak of spiritualist Messianism in which the radical wing of the Sabbathaian movement indulged presents a striking parallel to what happened to the doctrine of Joachim of Floris when the radical spiritualists of the Franciscan Order took it over in the middle of the thirteenth century. What Joachim of Floris called the *Evangelium Aeternum*, the Eternal Gospel, is essentially what the Kabbalists called *Torah d'atzilut*. Joachim understood the term as identical with the *intellectus mysticus*, the mystical meaning which in the third period of history would be revealed and substituted for the literal sense of the Gospel. This is

39. M. Yaffé, *Lebush ḥor Yekavoth* (Lwów, 1881), II, fol. 8 d.

40. Cf. *Sod ilan ha-atziluth*, edited by me from a Vatican manuscript, Jerusalem, 1951, p. 94.

what the Kabbalists before the Sabbathaian movement saw in the *Torah d'atzilut*. But the Franciscan followers of Joachim identified the writings of Joachim himself with the *Evangelium Aeternum* which they considered a new revelation of the Holy Spirit. This is exactly what happened to the concept of *Torah d'atzilut* in the Sabbathaian movement. The teachings of the antinomians, who took their clue from Sabbathai Zevi and some of his prophets in Salonica, were themselves considered as the new *Torah d'atzilut* brought down by Sabbathai Zevi and abrogating the old *Torah de-beriah*, identified with the Torah of the pre-Messianic aeon. The mystical content of the Torah broke away from its linking to the traditional reading of the Torah and acquired an independent and autonomous state where it was no longer expressed by the symbols of traditional Jewish life. Rather did it become opposed to them: the observance and performance of the new spiritual Torah depended now upon, and was carried out by, the abrogation of the *Torah de-beriah*, meaning now pure and simple Rabbinic Judaism.

This identification of the *Torah d'atzilut* with the Torah of the new aeon common to the more radical Sabbathaian sectarians has found no more clear-cut formulation than in the book *Shaare Gan Eden*, written during the early part of the eighteenth century by Jacob Koppel Lifschitz, a Volynian Kabbalist who succeeded in expressing and propagating almost each and every theological tenet of Sabbathaianism by putting into the preface of his book a fierce and obviously not quite serious denunciation of the sectarians and their secret doctrines which he himself followed! He says:

“In this our *Shemittah* the commandments of the Torah are a Divine necessity. . . . This Torah is called *Torah of Beriah* and not *Torah of Atzilut*. For in this *Shemittah* all the works of creation come from a sphere from where they combine in a way suitable to the law of the *Shemittah*. This is why we speak of the *Torah of Creation*. But in the previous *Shemittah*, which was one of Grace, and in which there was neither Evil Desire nor reward and punishment, another cosmic law necessarily prevailed. The words of the Torah were woven to correspond to the needs of that particular cosmic law. . . . But the actions which bring about the reappearance of the previous *Shemittah* at the rejuvenation of the world flow from an even higher sphere, namely, the Divine wisdom. In correspondence to it, the Torah (to be revealed in the new aeon) is called *Torah of Atzilut*. . . . At the end of the sixth millennium, when the light preceding the cosmic Sabbath will spread its rays . . . then many commandments will become obsolete, and at the end of our *Shemittah* new laws governing this

special period will be required, just as is explained in the Book Temunah. With reference to this new time it is said 'A new Torah will proceed' (from God). Not that the Torah will be replaced, for then this would entail the abrogation of one of the thirteen great 'principles of faith' stated by Maimonides. But the letters of the Torah will combine to form other words in another text, in accordance with the special needs of the end of the *Shemittah*. . . . We need not enlarge upon it here, as all these things are clearly stated in the Book Temunah, as you will find there."⁴¹

Tishby, who was the first to analyze the double-talk involved in this theory, has quite rightly pointed out that of course the Book Temunah contains nothing of this sort.⁴² We have seen how far its teachings went. But only the Messianic convictions of the present author led him to read into the Book Temunah the conception of a special law of the end of the *Shemittah*, thus explaining how the transition from the *Torah de-beriah* to the *Torah d'atzilut* could be effected even in our present *Shemittah*! Of course, the heretical Kabbalists of the Sabbathian sect could have quite rightly invoked the authority of Cordovero and his followers about the eschatological changes to take place in the reading of the Torah, which we have analyzed before. It should be said in truth that Kabbalistic speculation had indeed prepared the way and the conceptual tools for such a new interpretation, without being aware of the antinomian possibilities involved in their views.

Having completed our exposition, we may say this: in tracing the full course of the development of some basic ideas of the Kabbalists regarding the mystical essence of the Torah, we have seen how great a stimulus such basic ideas were to the development of the mystical theology of Judaism. Moreover, we cannot but wonder at the astounding vigor with which they were formulated and developed. In one form or another you will find some of the ideas which I have traced from their first sources, and in their most concise and classical formulations, in literally thousands of books of almost every type of later Hebrew literature. Sometimes the sharp edges which are not lacking in the Kabbalistic formulations we have discussed have been blunted and the high pitch of the writing has been toned down. Their fundamental importance remains, however, for an understanding of many aspects of Jewish literature.

41. Jacob K. Lifschitz, *Sha'arai Gan 'Eden* (Krakow, 1880), fol. 12 c.

42. Tishby in *Kenesseth*, vol. IX (Jerusalem, 1945), pp. 252-54.