

The Mystical and Magical Powers of Letters and Numbers in the Jewish Tradition

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Motto: "*Semiotics is a complot of those who wish to make us believe that language serves to communicate thoughts*".
Umberto Eco, *Limits of Interpretation*

1. Mystical Readings of the Sacred Text

Written or oral, the sacred teachings from which the mystic starts in his quest for the divine are, in the end, nothing more than a corpus of texts. The mystic interprets them by means of the religious doctrine in which he has been trained and, of course, through his own understanding capacity. Although Jewish mysticism is relatively strict, casting warning signals regarding the dangers awaiting the irresponsible who would dare start on this path without solid knowledge, still a certain liberty of movement is permitted to the disciple by the master. As the very role of mysticism is to provide the opportunity for the reinterpretation of the sacred texts the need for some space of maneuver is obvious.

Thus, the first thing that strikes the scholar who studies Jewish mysticism is the importance given to the textual interpretation. Clearly, this has nothing to do with the scientific preoccupation that tries to test and falsify hypotheses, nor with philosophical hermeneutics, which tries to study the nature of meaning.¹ This is rather an interpretation seen as a form of creation. What the great Jewish mystics in general, and the medieval ones in particular, left to their disciples and followers was the outstanding value of their commentaries and exegeses on the sacred texts. Mixing intuition with creativity, and experience with logic, they created new texts, containing some ideas from the original ones but also additional notions, which, coming from their inner self, represented them.

According to Ioan Pânzaru,² by definition the interpretation process leads to the constitution of the sense and respectively to the subjective impression of understanding, whose final result is the responsive behavior, in its turn a text. The text contains a message, sometimes a representation, but the notions are not equivalent. It may be argued, as Gershom Scholem,³ and not only, did, that the

¹ As argued by Pânzaru, *Practici* 7.

² Pânzaru, *Practici* 7.

³ Scholem, *Cabala* 21.

mystics tried to read their own thoughts in the biblical texts. This makes the analysis even the more difficult because in such cases it is hard to establish whether the biblical text provided the basis for the exegetical impulse or, on the contrary, exegesis was used as a means for legitimizing the mystic's own thoughts, in the attempt to link the old view to the new one.

On the other hand, however, it is natural, and generally accepted, that, when reading a text, each of us vibrates to those values that are already present in our inner self and not to others. That is why not anyone can read any text. Certainly, this is where training or education comes in. Or simply common sense, the knowledge gathered from day to day life or, as George Bernard Shaw defines it, the collection of prejudices accumulated by an individual by the age of 18. But here also intervenes the so-called freedom of interpretation, the game between the evident and the latent sense of the text. According to Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677), the sacred books leave reason all freedom of judgment, having to be interpreted through themselves. Still, one cannot ignore the existence of a figurative approach, which takes the text's contents as a succession of masks hiding the true referents.⁴ Moreover, one may reach the point where the text's elements are simply travestied by means of a code. However, decoding is not always the same thing with interpretation.

Starting from the conception that we cannot define God univocally due to the inadequacy of language, Hermetic thinking actually states that the more ambiguous, polyvalent and full of symbols and metaphors our language is, the more appropriate it will be for naming a One in which the coincidence of the opposites is achieved and therefore the identity principle vanishes.⁵ Consequently, in this case interpretation is infinite. In the quest for the ultimate sense, the sliding of the tangible sense in all directions becomes acceptable. One defines not by description but by analogy. Each object hides an initiatory secret. But a revealed initiatory secret serves to nothing. In order to preserve its value, such a secret must lead to another secret, and so on, infinitely. The Hermetic secret must be void. As Tibetan mysticism⁶ excellently puts it, the man who

⁴ This is where symbolism comes in. In a detailed analysis, I. Pânzaru evokes in *Practici ale interpretării de text* the enterprise of certain monastic authors of the Carolingian age who, having read the free exegeses of the Church Fathers, felt the need to systematize the meaning values given to each notion in the interpretative texts. The result was a set of works that counted these symbols, which in fact prevented any new interpretation of the text.

⁵ Eco, *Limitele* 49.

⁶ In *Tainele* 62 David-Neel speaks about the Tibetan theory, which teaches that the human condition may be surpassed not by knowledge but by passing beyond knowledge, where the wise man becomes aware of the fact that knowledge itself is just a means and not an aim.

pretends he has found a secret is not an initiate, but someone who has stopped at a very superficial level of the mystery.

One may thus say that Hermetic thinking turns everything that happens into a linguistic phenomenon and at the same time subtracts all communicative power from language, leaving it with only an encoding one.⁷ The Hermetic tradition feeds any attitude for which a text is only the chain of the reactions it produces. From this perspective, any sacred text determines the apparition of a reading that Umberto Eco calls “suspicious” and translates as “excessive”.⁸ Nevertheless, to the extent to which one tries to remain within the institutionalized boundaries of the pre-established religious dogma, acceptable interpretative licenses are limited.

Having said that, let us turn to the Jewish tradition. The most important aspect of the Jewish sacred text is the manner in which it is written. Since the Hebrew alphabet contains consonants only, the written word appears as an obscure corpus, with a hidden significance. What gives life to it is the voice sound. Reading is an adventure. If it weren't for the oral tradition, which has preserved it, it would turn each time into a hangman game, in which the right sonority should be guessed. Therefore it may be said that the reading of the text has been legitimized by the centuries of vocalization and the sense of the verse has been clarified (?) by the long oral tradition, which has evolved in perfect parallel with the written one.

On the other hand, this is precisely where the doubts arise. If Torah is of divine origin, then any human intervention will be meant to remain under a question mark. Since in Hebrew changing the punctuation of a text means changing its sense, it is clear why accepting the idea that the divine text is submitted to a modulation of human inspiration raises a problem. The current reading of the Torah is ultimately authorized by usage only. And as the entire edifice of the text is founded on the manner in which the consonants are vocalized, it is obvious why in the end the understanding of the Torah is strictly connected to the vowels and why Jewish mystics have maintained that “vowels are the letters' soul” and the letters without vowels are “bodies without soul” (Zohar). The Torah's text, kabbalists concluded,⁹ was not vocalized precisely in

⁷ Eco, *Limitele* 50. U. Eco even proposes a so-called “unlimited interpretation” mysticism. Of the pre-requisites mentioned by him we shall only recall a few: a text is an open universe in which the interpreter may find infinite connections; language does not serve for finding a unique, pre-existing signified; language mirrors the inadequacy of thinking; in order to save the text by becoming aware of the signified's infinity the reader must guess that every line hides a secret; the chosen one is the person who understands that the real signified of a text is its void; etc. 57.

⁸ Eco, *Limitele* 101.

⁹ Yakov Ben Sheshet, quoted by Idel in *Cabala* 289.

order to allow the interpretation of the words in accordance with the specific significance of each possible vocalization variant. Moreover, this way Torah potentially includes all aspects and profound significances of each letter, each related to a secret, infinitely. This stands to prove the illuminated nature of the non-vocalized Torah. In this sense, the relation between vowels and consonants is seen as being parallel with the one between soul, or form, and matter. Reading the Torah means limiting its infinity, and is the expression of a potential significance inherent to consonants. Kabbalistic reading is therefore an act of cooperation with God, a con-creation of the Torah.¹⁰

Along the time, the oral tradition shifted its accent with the introduction in the sacred text of signs rendering the vowels. Apparently, as of that moment anyone could have read the Torah. Still, in the synagogue the Torah has been maintained until this day in an unaltered form. This state of fact regards two aspects: first of all, the text is written without any breaks and punctuation marks, being a continuous succession of consonants; secondly, when successively copying it, the scribes had the obligation to keep unchanged even those constructions which seemed to be mistaken according to the grammatical rules. To understand why, one must address the meanings granted to the Torah in the mystical tradition.

Torah's mystical sense is tightly linked to its being considered to be of divine origin. Regarded from this perspective, the sense cannot be communicated straightly; it needs to be deciphered behind the appearance. Thus, what can be read in the Torah is just a surface layer, which, once removed, reveals an entire secondary world. In the attempt to analyze these hidden aspects, Gershom Scholem proposes as starting point three principles: 1. the principle of God's name; 2 the principle of the Torah seen as a body and 3. the principle of the unending richness of the divine word's significance.¹¹

The importance of God's name – or names – and their magic values is a paramount topic. Whether extracted from Torah's text or obtained through letter combinations, these names have been used in magic practices ever since the Hellenistic age. Therefore the fear that their unreasonable use may determine true disasters, breakings in the natural balance of things, should not surprise. The attempt to preserve Torah's hidden sense from such unwanted interventions resulted in a new conception, which stated that Torah's paragraphs were not, in fact, reproduced in writing in their true succession, known only to the chosen initiates, so that not anyone who read it might perform miracles (or on the contrary, destroy the world). There are various theories and treatises providing

¹⁰ Idel, *Cabala* 290.

¹¹ Scholem, *Cabala* 46. G. Scholem underlines that these three principles or analysis perspectives do not share the same historical and psychological origin.

the most diverse explanations in this regard. Scholem gives two examples: a book preserved in manuscript only, *Simushe Torah* (The Book on the Theurgic Use of the Torah), which relates that together with the Torah Moses also received from God the letter combinations representing its esoteric aspect,¹² and Moses ben Nahman (Nahmanides)'s comment of the Torah:

“We possess an authentic tradition that Torah is entirely composed of God’s names, in such a manner that the words we read could be cut up in a completely different way, in [esoteric] names... In the haggadic affirmation that Torah was originally written with black fire on white fire, there is a confirmation of our opinion that the writing used was continuous and without separation into words, which allowed its use both as a succession of [esoteric] names (al derech ha-shemot) and in the traditional manner, as history and commandments. Thus, the Torah was given to Moses in a form in which the separation into words brought with it its reading as a sum of divine commandments. At the same time, however, he also obtained, in an oral form, its transmission as a succession of names”.¹³

In this context the importance of the oral tradition becomes obvious. This esoteric outlook also explains why the Torah becomes unusable in case it has an additional, missing or changed letter.¹⁴ Here again Scholem provides us with an example: as Rabbi Meir (2nd century), renowned teacher of the *Mishna*, underlined, this might have negative connotations as well. While he was a Torah copier with Rabbi Ismail, the latter taught him: “My son, pay attention to your job, for it is a godly work; it is enough to skip or add a single letter to destroy the entire world ...”¹⁵ In these circumstances, a single step was necessary for passing from magic to mysticism, which the kabbalists undertook by accepting the idea that not only was the Torah made up of God’s names but that it represented, in fact, one single great name of the divinity. This outlook is grounded on the mystical unity of the Torah, whose primary aim is not to transmit a specific meaning but to express the mightiness and majesty of God, which are concentrated in His “name”. Going even further in this direction, an old *Midrash* mentions even that the Torah came before the creation, being at the same time God’s source of inspiration and His instrument. In an attempt to express this theory in a more rational manner, Joseph Gikatilla, Spanish kabbalist of the 13th century, states that the Torah is not exactly God’s name, but the explanation of God’s name. From this purely mystical perspective, the

¹² Scholem, *Cabala* 47.

¹³ Quoted by Scholem, *Cabala* 48.

¹⁴ Especially since in Hebrew there are double letters – two letter rendering the same sound and two sounds rendered by the same letter.

¹⁵ According to Scholem, *Cabala* 48.

Torah is regarded as a warp in which the true name – the Tetragrammaton YHWH – is woven secretly and indirectly. Another step further taken later brings the kabbalists to the conclusion that there is a kind of equivalence between God and the Torah. The letters are seen as the divinity's mystical body and God as the letters' soul.¹⁶

Torah is thus represented as a body. Regarded as such, it becomes clear why certain passages from it seem less important than others, just like the parts of the human body. On the other hand, however, the true mystic will find the secret meanings even behind the most common verses. The Zohar shows that:

“Whoever deals with the Torah ensures the evolution of the world and allows each element to fulfill its function, for there is no member in the human body that does not have its correspondent in the world taken in its entirety. Because, just as man's body is composed of members and articulations of various ranks, each having an action and a reaction on the others and together making up a body, so is the world: all the creatures in it are organized like the members, in a hierarchical relation to each other, and when well organized they make up, in the most accurate sense of the word, a body. And everything is organized according to the initial principle of the Torah because the Torah is composed entirely of members and articulations organized in a hierarchical relation to each other and, when well organized, they make up a unique body” (Zohar, I, 134 b).

This parallel is taken even further in *Tikunei Zohar*, which considers that the Torah is equal with Israel, in itself regarded as a mystical body. “The Torah has a head, a body, a heart, a mouth and other members, just like Israel” (Tikun 21, f. 52 b). The mystical body of Israel's community does not refer to the Jewish people only but it is considered to be, at the same time, an esoteric symbol of God's presence, the *Shekhinah*. The parallelism of the two symbols goes so far that it leads to the conclusion that the Jewish people's exile is the physical equivalent and even the result of the *Shekhinah*'s exile following the breaking of the vessels and / or the Fall, which determines a permanent interconnection between the two motives. Here also intervenes the old separation of the Torah into the “written Torah” and “oral Torah”. In the esoteric sense, the written Torah is represented by the Tanach, the oral Torah is made up of the explanations and comments provided by the wise scholars in connection with its text and together they are a unity.

Naturally, under these circumstances the written Torah started to be identified with the giving sphere of the divine and the oral Torah with the receiving sphere of the *Shekhinah* and of Israel's community. Moreover, here

¹⁶ This image reminds of the relation between consonants and vowels, and it is precisely where the contradiction between the human and the divine intervention in the reading of the Torah becomes obvious.

we find again the conception that the initial Torah was written with black fire on white fire, mentioned earlier. The white fire signifies the written Torah, in which the letters' form does not appear, and the black fire the consonants and vowels that give birth to the oral Torah. The only man who has ever reached the written mystical Torah, hidden in the unseen form of the white light, was ultimately Moses – the rest of the prophets and mystics have managed to catch glimpses only. Taken to the extreme, this theory actually maintains that there is only an oral Torah, the written Torah being regarded exclusively as a mystical notion. In its current form, the written Torah is only a reproduction of the mystery's translation.

At this point the unending richness of Torah's significances becomes obvious. It is clear that in his experience the mystic passes beyond the external sense of the sacred text and plunges into deeper and deeper layers of meaning. Torah now appears as the representation of a lively hierarchy of semantic layers and significances. If in the first phase this was all about the Torah's hidden and visible, esoteric and exoteric dualism, later on this view was refined under various influences. Jewish mystics and especially the kabbalists were not seeking in the Tanach the allegoric representation of philosophical ideas but a symbolic representation of the process of divine life. This led to the emergence of a theory proposing four levels of reading – literal, philosophical-allegorical, haggadic and mystical-theosophical.¹⁷ Gershom Scholem identifies the root of this conception in *Midrash ha-Ne'elam* on the *Book of Ruth* where it is stated that:

“Torah's words can be compared with a nut. How come? Just as a nut has an exterior cover and an inner core, so does every word of the Torah acquire an exterior reality [ma'aseh] – Midrash, Haggadah and Mystery [Sod] – each representing a meaning deeper than the previous”.¹⁸

Nevertheless, this theory found its most famous expression in the (lost) story of Moses of Leon, called *Pardes*. The pun between Pardes with the literal meaning of Paradise (orchard and by extension Heaven) and PaRDeS as the collection of the initials of the words Peshat (literal meaning), Remes (allegorical meaning), Derasha (Talmudic and Haggadic meaning) and Sod (mystical meaning) gave birth to a long tradition of interpretations in Jewish mysticism and not only. As Moshe Idel shows in his turn,¹⁹ there were kabbalists, like Abraham Abulafia, who thought that the curse in the literal

¹⁷ These four levels of reading may be found, as mentioned previously in this study, both in Christian and Islamic mysticism. Nevertheless we shall not further detail this aspect, as it is not the intention of this research to pursue the historical evolution of these notions and the manner in which they influenced each other.

¹⁸ Scholem, *Cabala* 64.

¹⁹ Idel, *Cabala* 282.

sense was blessing in the hidden sense and the curse in the hidden sense was blessing in the literal one, granting negative, even demonic, connotations to the latter. To them, the literal meaning remained the patrimony of the many and the esoteric one the patrimony of the chosen few.

Another thesis of crucial importance to the reading of the sacred text is that behind every word, or even letter, there are seventy aspects, or “faces”. Initiated by a late *Midrash (Bemidbar Raba, 12th century)*, this theory starts from the conception that there were seventy nations populating the Earth. The Talmud states that each commandment given by God on Mount Sinai was instantly divided in all the seventy languages so that everybody could receive it at the same time (Talmud, Shabbat 88b). This idea later crystallized in the conception of the seventy meanings, representing the secrets that may be found in each word.

It is obvious that the number is ultimately more or less arbitrary, with all its attributed significances, its only purpose being to underline the inexhaustible totality of the divine word. At this point a parallel may be identified with another type of symbolism. On the one hand, Jewish mystics see creation as a game of the divine names and their respective letters, and on the other hand, as an emanation process of energy and light. The two views are mutually complacent but they are also confusing to each other. Thus, the letters and names represent a concentration of energy and they illuminate the mystic who, through his meditations, catches a ray of the infinite light, but there are 22 letters and 10 spheres of energy and light emanation (*Sefirot*), representing the primordial numbers and at the same time the divine commandments. Several explanations were proposed in order to balance these discrepancies. The kabbalists considered, for instance, that the light and the mystery of the Torah were one and the same thing, given that the numerical value of both words in Hebrew is identical: 207. As the *Midrash ha-Ne’elam* shows, when God said “Let there be light” he was referring to the mystery of the Torah, in which He included the light, but in an occulted form, so as not to overwhelm human beings. The world could not withhold God’s majesty manifested in its plenitude. “That is why Torah’s stories are only its exterior garments”, states the Zohar (Zohar I, 140 a).

Moreover, this outlook was taken to the extreme when, during the 16th century, the kabbalistic School of Safed proposed an even wider interpretation. Thus, if following the exodus from Egypt, and respectively when the Torah was given to them on Mount Sinai, there were 600,000 souls, so are, in each generation, 600,000 fundamental souls of Israel. For each of them the Torah has a particular significance and message, which only the addressee can penetrate. This mystical idea, according to which each soul has its own path to the understanding of the Torah, was however troubled by the fact that in its written form, the Torah has only 340,000 letters. In order to explain this inadequacy the kabbalists came up with an original solution: there were indeed 600,000 letters

on the first table but part of them were lost when they were transcribed on the second. Nevertheless, by a secret combination process the current letters may lead to the 600,000 in the original text. This idea is grounded on a tradition stating that there were in fact two sets of tables of the Law, one received by Moses on Mount Sinai, which he alone could read, and a second set, rewritten after the first one was broken during the period of idolatry of the Golden Calf. When the first tables were broken the letters engraved on them flew off thus leaving the spiritual elements visible only to the mystic, who must discover them in the hidden layers of the Torah in its current form.

Naturally, the interpretation of Torah's significances did not stop here. There were two ideas that still needed reconciliation: the existence of the original Torah and the existence of the physical Torah, respectively, if the Torah preceded the creation, what did it look like before the Fall. The solution, proposed by Moses Cordovero and taken over by many after him, was the very evolution of the world. If the world acquired material manifestation after the Fall, so did the spiritual letters of the Torah. From this perspective it may be said that the commandments were initially warnings. On the other hand, this theory presupposes that in the Messianic era people will shake off their material body and recover the mystical body Adam had before the Fall. At that moment Torah's letters will be reorganized in the divine formula and will compose new words that will speak of different things. In a profound sense, this outlook maintains that, in fact, the same letters reproduce, in their various combinations, the diverse aspects of the world.

Another interesting theory analyzed by Gershom Scholem in this context is that proposed by *Sefer ha-Temuna* (Book on Appearance or Book on Image, referring to the letters' image seen as the mystical appearance of the divine), published in Catalonia in 1250.²⁰ This work no longer speaks of the various aspects of the Torah during one stage or another of the creation, but of the aspects of a succession of creations. Each aspect is governed by one of the seven subordinated *Sefirot*, because God's creative power becomes manifest in each *Sefira* and in a cosmic unit decisively formed by it, called *Shemita*. Starting from the prescription related to the Sabbatical and the Jubilee year in Deuteronomy 15, this conception states that each *Shemita* brings about another attribute of the divine, as the dominant power in the corresponding creation process. Only in the final succession of the seven *Shemitot* that make up the great Jubilee year of the worlds will God's entire creative power become manifest. This view is based on the same conception that Torah's absolute being becomes more and more relative, and reveals itself differently in each *Shemita*. In each such period the text will read something completely different, for in any

²⁰ Scholem, *Cabala* 91.

of them the divine wisdom of the original Torah is represented under another aspect. Here, too, the letters are combined in various patterns, according to the linguistic context of the respective cycle.

In an attempt to explain the current state of facts, the book's author shows that, just like in the succession of the *Sefirot*, the first three *Shemiotot* are a period of grace, a period of rigor or judgment and a period of mercy, mankind being now in the second. So, in the first period, when creature and Creator were in a happy relationship, the Torah contained no interdictions, but only statements. In the period in which we live the Torah has taken the form we know today, adjusting itself to the circumstances. Evidently, the next period, that of mercy, will mark the return to purer forms and harmony. Regarded from this perspective, the current form of the Torah is accepted as final for this eon, with the amendment that it may have an entirely different face in other eons.

Even in this context, however, the idea that, irrespective of the manner in which they are combined, the letters' number should remain the same is strongly underlined. Starting from this rule, some mystics who had embraced this outlook concluded that in this *Shemita* there is a letter missing from the Torah. The limitation of our live can only be the result of an absence, of an imperfection. In order to account for the current state of the world, a letter from the present form of the Torah must be incomplete. As each letter is a concentration of divine energy, any letter rendered in an incomplete form will prevent the manifestation of the light and of the hidden forces. The blame was finally laid on letter *shin*, which, some kabbalists said, should have not three arms, as it has in the current writing, but four.²¹ Other, more radical, kabbalists decided that we are, in fact, dealing with a total occultation. To account for such a state of the world a letter must have completely disappeared from the alphabet. However, we must not despair. Although invisible to us, the 23rd letter of the true alphabet will become accessible by revelation in the next *Shemita*. This absence may additionally account for the negative aspects of the Torah – its presence will help turning them into affirmations.

An even more radical version of this theory, rendered in *Sefer ha-Temuna* (f 31 a), maintains that it is not just a letter that's missing from the Torah, but two books. Based on a passage from the Talmud (Shabbat 116 a) where it is written that the final Torah contains seven books, this outlook starts from the idea that, if there were seven *Sefirot* manifested in the seven cycles of the eons, then there should be seven books corresponding to them. Only the above-mentioned pre-requisites have led to the fact that in this *Shemita* just five of them are readable, the other two having been occulted. Their occultation, how-

²¹ The theory is based on the fact that the Talmud recommends the impression of both forms of letter *shin* on the leather straps fixed on the forehead with the phylacteries (*Tefilin*).

ever, seems incomplete since verses 10,35 and 10,36²² of the fourth book of Moses, Numbers, allude to the two missing books and may be regarded as their compression. These occulted parts diminish Torah's inner force, which may be extended only in a future eon. In support of this thesis kabbalists also quote verse 1,3 of Genesis²³ as an allusion to a *Shemita* made up exclusively of light without darkness, the remains of a fuller Torah, communicated in the *Shemita* of Grace but refused to us. In this context, an interpretation like that of Rabbi Mordechai Yaffe of Lublin (end 16th century) according to which the current *Shemita* began with the revelation on Mount Sinai can raise but question marks. The idea that the flood and the Sodom and Gomorrah episode could have taken place in a *Shemita* of Grace seems at least eccentric.

It is interesting to note that the conception regarding the existence in the Torah of certain occulted parts, which would once become visible, resisted throughout time until the emergence of Hassidic mysticism. In an attempt to combine the observance of the Jewish tradition and profession of faith according to which there is no Torah other than the one given by God to Moses on Mount Sinai with the *Midrashic* interpretation of Isaiah 41,4 "The Law [Torah] will come from me" as "A new law [Torah] will come from me", Hassidic mystic Rabbi Levy Isaac of Berdicev proposed the following explanation for this phenomenon:

"But so it is that even the blank spaces in the Torah roll are made up of letters, it's just that we cannot read them like we do the black ones. But in the Messianic era God will show us, too, the blank spaces in the Torah, whose letters are unknown to us now; of course this is what is meant by the reference to the 'new Torah'."²⁴

It is evident that from the religious authority's point of view such a position provides too large a space of maneuver because it actually justifies any deviation and even heresy. In these circumstances, it was not very hard for a mystic like Shabbatai Zvi to take this step astray in 1665. Considering that redemption made it possible to upset the old law and set up a new *Shemita*, he actually tried to force God's hand by declaring himself the Messiah. Starting from an older theory, first expressed by the author of the *Tikunei Zohar*,²⁵ regarding the existence of two different aspects of the Torah, "*Torah de-Beria*"

²² "And it came to pass, when the ark set forward, that Moses said Rise up, Lord, and let thine enemies be scattered; and let them that hate thee flee before thee". "And when it rested, he said, Return, O Lord, unto the many thousands of Israel."

²³ "And God said Let there be light; and there was light".

²⁴ "Imre Tzaddikim", Shitomir 1900, in the notes of a disciple on the lectures of the Rabbi of Berdicev, quoted by Scholem, Cabala 93.

²⁵ According to Scholem, Cabala 95.

(Torah in the stage of creation)²⁶ and “*Torah de-Atziluf*” (Torah in the stage of emanation),²⁷ Zvi’s adepts considered in their turn that the new spiritual Torah, brought by him on earth, replaced the Torah of the stage of creation. This way they tore away Torah’s mystical contents from the text’s significance and indirectly from the symbols of the traditional Judaic life style, setting them in contradiction and thus giving birth to a mystical nihilism taken almost to the absurd: “the suspension of the Torah is its fulfillment”.

2. Kabbalistic Hermeneutics

2.1 Theory and Practice in the Kabbalah

Various scholars have claimed that the Kabbalah is a theoretical rather than practical doctrine.²⁸ However, the authors of the mystical texts that make up the Kabbalah note quite clearly that for the untrained the danger comes precisely from the possible inappropriate use of the practical recipes contained therein. The kabbalists’ conception that by manipulating the letters’ order one may disclose, in given circumstances, Torah’s secrets is not an abstract theory but a current practice.²⁹ The fear that by mistaking one of Torah’s letters one may destroy the world is not a theoretical one. Neither does the creation of a Golem stop at the theoretical level, even though this human creative capacity has never been proven in a scientific experiment. These are ultimately elements of magic, which in certain historical periods the Jewish religion accepted and, to a certain extent, even embraced. A proof may be found in the very Talmud, whose authority is doubtless, where the story is told of two rabbis who used to create by secret methods, every Shabbat eve, a three-quarter grown calf, which they would afterwards eat (Talmud, Sanhedrin 65 b).

Paradoxically, the practical aspects of the Kabbalah were highlighted in Gershom Scholem’s studies, although he saw in the Kabbalah a *corpus* of rather

²⁶ Mentioned in Proverbs 8,22 (“The Lord possessed me in the beginning of his way, before his works of old”) as the one shown to us by God in creation.

²⁷ Mentioned in Psalms 19,8 (“The statutes of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart: the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes”) as being untouched and still sealed in its divine nature. It is this non-created, emanation-related feature of the Torah that validates the mystical thesis concerning its identity with God.

²⁸ M. Idel believes this outlook is based primarily on the absence of information, inaccessible to the foreign scholar due to the fact that a large number of documents are still in manuscript or, although published, have never been translated from Hebrew (Idel, *Cabala* 55).

²⁹ Idel, *Abulafia*’s 293.

theoretical teachings. In Scholem's interpretation,³⁰ the process described by the kabbalists as an emanation of divine energy and light is also characterized as a disclosure of the divine word. The parallel between the two essential forms of kabbalistic symbolism is perfect. The kabbalists speak of attributes and spheres of light and in the same context they speak of divine names and of the letters they are composed of. As mentioned earlier here, these two types of description appear constantly together. The secret world of the divinity is one of sounds, language, names that reveal themselves following their own law. The elements of the divine language, the letters composing the sacred text are more than simple conventional means of communication. Each of them represents a concentration of energy and expresses a rich range of meanings that cannot be entirely rendered by human language. The revelation of these meanings and thereby of the divine majesty depends therefore on the mystic's capacity to release the hidden energy.

In a more recent analysis, Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan has proposed,³¹ in his turn, a division of the Kabbalah in three categories: theoretical, meditative and practical. The theoretical Kabbalah deals with the dynamics of the manner in which God reveals His divine being through the various channels of the divine realm (*Sefirot*) and the various levels of reality (*Atzilut, Beriyah, Yetsirah and Asiyah*). The meditative Kabbalah is preoccupied with man's union with the divine through these channels and worlds. The practical Kabbalah, more controversial, is focused on the permutation of the divine mystical names for magical purposes. Kaplan identifies the source of the latter in Lurianic Kabbalah, in the concept of *Kavanah*, the mystical intention and the meditation accompanying the act of fulfillment. The act in itself is seen as body and the mystical *Kavanah* as soul of the action in fulfillment. "If someone fulfils the sacred act without the right intention then everything is body without soul", says Isaac Luria.³² Although the concept itself appeared earlier, being briefly mentioned in the Zohar, Luria seems to have been the first to integrate it in a coherent system. Proposing specific meditative practices associated virtually to each aspect of everyday life and each human activity, Luria developed the idea of a permanent meditative state. Formal prayer, in which each word had kabbalistic significance, was seen as a *summum* of the entire set of such meditations.

In Scholem's expression, *Kavanah* designates the aspect of the divine visible in each concrete act prescribed by the ritual, and the totality of these acts constitutes the movement symbolized by the rite. The outer action is thus transformed into a mystical movement whereby the human will attempted to

³⁰ Scholem, *Cabala* 45.

³¹ Kaplan, *Meditation* 225.

³² Quoted by Scholem, *Cabala* 144.

comply with the divine will. In these circumstances, the *Kavanah* becomes a mystical tool whereby each cultic action of the initiate is turned into a mystery. Since no mystical writing makes any concrete description of the phases of this practice, Moshe Idel concludes³³ that this might have been a de-automation process in which each word of the prayer had to be uttered in a well-defined and punctual manner. For instance, in the case of ecstatic mysticism, Abraham Abulafia proposed to recite the letters with melodic intonation or, in other words, to reduce the linguistic material to its primary elements, considered as absolute monads. This way the classical language was turned into a series of magical sounds with the intrinsic purpose of facilitating the return to the primordial language.

By means of the *Kavanah* the mystic raises from the lower worlds to the highest realms, through concentration on the *Sefirot* and the relationships between them. The ten *Sefirot* are mystically expressed by the correct combination of the letters that represent each of them. Initially, the relation between the symbol and the symbolized was balanced, with one word corresponding to each *Sefira*. Later on, however, the conception evolved into a priority order. *Sefer Yetsirah* proposed YHVH as the supreme divine name and mentioned that its six primary combinations “seal the world”. Regarded as “divine lights”, the ten *Sefirot* are contemplated from the viewpoint of quality, number and name in order to increase the intellect’s and imagination’s training in view of the mystic’s immersion in the superior emanations of the divine reality, culminating in *Ein Sof*. The correct permutation of letters and names facilitates the mystical concentration and awakening. The practice is completed with the visualization of the *Sefirot* or, in certain kabbalistic traditions in which this is expressly forbidden, with the visualization of the colors associated to the *Sefirot*. Evidently, such visualization focuses on the letters of the divine names associated to the *Sefirot*, regarded as symbols. It is reasonable to assume that this visualization process allowed the raising of the kabbalist’s imaginative faculty to a higher ontological level, from where he could determine the divinity’s descent on earth. The process induced a paranormal state of consciousness, with theurgic powers.

Some kabbalists, like Yohanan Alemanno (15th century), considered that the *Sefirot* were a more or less mechanical super-structure, perfectly easy to manipulate by a skillful magician. The significance of the letters and divine names used in prayer thus changes. They are turned from channels of exploration of the divine process into the components and instruments of a practice. They no longer represent a *modus cognoscendi* but a *modus operandi*.³⁴ Starting from the relation existing between each *Sefira*, a letter, a divine name and a certain

³³ Idel, *Cabala* 151.

³⁴ Idel, *Cabala* 277-278.

expression, Alemanno was convinced that it was possible to determine, by use of appropriate words, the manifestation of a certain *Sefira*, in order to obtain the desired effects on the world. This shows an evolution from the simple contemplation of the divine harmony to the use of knowledge of the celestial mechanism for practical purposes and from the kabbalistic symbol to a magical language respectively.

By promoting the theory that the variation of vocalization allows for the interpretation of a given phrase in various manners, Jacob ben Sheshet (13th century) paves the way for a free exegesis of the sacred text: depending on the diverse vocalizations any kabbalistic notion can be associated to each divine name and to each *Sefira*. A special technique, identified, with small variations, in many kabbalistic authors by Moshe Idel,³⁵ consisted in vocalizing the word *Devareka* in order to visualize the letters of the Tetragrammaton in a circle (or sphere) colored in fire-like red. The circle consisted in a diagram containing three concentric circles, each representing a *Sefira* whose name was written on the respective circle. Near the name were indicated the corresponding color and a vocalized Tetragrammaton.³⁶ The resulting image was more than a simple drawing – it was an anthropomorphic configuration symbolizing an aspect of the divine realm. Such detailed instructions suggest a long evolution, developed by each generation of kabbalists, of certain practical applications designed to involve the macrocosm. That is why it was so important to preserve the secret and the oral transmission to the initiates only.

The main theurgic purpose of the *Kavanot* was to elevate the mystic, by *Gematria* and combinations of the divine names but also by visualization of colors, in complex combinatory and permutation techniques, to the higher realms, allowing him to take part in the *Tikkun Olam*. Scholem identifies the source of this conception in the *Zohar*, where there is a description of the four consecutive functions of prayer: purification and fulfillment through sacred acts, involvement of the natural world of creation, which, if put into language, would sing hymns together with the people, reaching the realm of angels, and participation in the *Tikkun* process of the Divine Name, in which the *Sefirotic* world is located.³⁷ The unification of the letters of the divine name YHWH was thus regarded in perfect parallelism with the unification of everything that existed, in the process of restoration of the original harmony. Such unifications, in their turn expressions of man's unification with the divine, were called *Yechidim*. Concretely, a long series of *Yechidim* was devised based on the

³⁵ Idel, *Cabala* 154.

³⁶ The color associations may vary, since with Chaim Vital the Tetragrammaton is white.

³⁷ Here appears once again the idea of the human co-participation in the divine process.

manipulation of the letters of the various divine names. Sometimes two or more of these names were combined together, their consonants anagrammed and their vocalizations varied. Moreover, an old Jewish tradition taken over by the kabbalists from the *Hekhalot* literature claimed that each letter of the divine name was in itself a divine name,³⁸ by vocalization.

The letters were used at both the cosmological and theological level, in a complex system of utterances and meditations. Eleazar of Worms (12th - 13th century) included in his book *Sefer ha-Shem* (Book of the Name) a combinatory table of the divine names' letters – proof of a long practice – which became a pattern for many later ecstatic mystics. At about the same time an unknown author³⁹ wrote in a book entitled *Sefer ha-Hayim* (Book of Life) that it was enough to utter the divine names or those of the angels to obtain what you wanted or to receive information about secret things: the Holy Spirit would reveal them to you. In his turn, Eleazar was convinced that in the state of ecstasy induced by the utterance of the divine names he could obtain the revelation of future events. Nevertheless, as Moshe Idel remarks,⁴⁰ this was not a simple utterance of certain combinations elaborated after a pre-established scheme but a component of the mystical practice, which, together with meditations, body movements, breath control, etc. was designed to involve the mental faculties, creating a certain psychical state. That was why one of the dangers awaiting the mystic in his experience, as underlined by Abraham Abulafia (who provided, in his turn, a model table⁴¹ for reciting all the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet in combination with the Tetragrammaton) was that it was possible, in the absence of an appropriate training and control, for the sublime elements he would meet on his way to unbalance him. In the view of another kabbalist, writing at the same time with Eleazar of Worms, Moshe of Taku,⁴² if the seeker did not master the technique, after uttering the divine name he would return to the initial state of confusion of the reason. In his turn, Moses Cordovero thought in *Pardes Rimmonim*⁴³ that this technique was designed to determine the *unio mystica* by attracting the divinity down, outlook that may also be found in Renaissance Hermetic magic.

According to Kaplan, since the Divine Names reflect spiritual forces, which have their counterparts in the human psyche, the effects of these *Yechidim* in

³⁸ Even the divine names used in this mystical-magical practice were taken from *Merkabah* mysticism: Adiriron, Bihiron, etc.

³⁹ Quoted by Idel, *Cabala* 145.

⁴⁰ Idel, *Cabala* 146.

⁴¹ As M. Idel proves, such tables had both mystical and magical purposes.

⁴² Quoted by Idel, *Cabala* 145.

⁴³ Quoted by the same Idel, *Cabala* 149.

elevating the mystic's consciousness can be dramatic.⁴⁴ This also evidences the magical value of this mystical technique: by ascending in the realm of the *Sefirot* the mystic can influence them. To exemplify the manner in which the *Yechid* facilitates the mystical elevation, Kaplan indicates:

“The lower soul (nefesh) is from the Universe of Asiyah, which is associated with the name Adonay (“Lord”, the divine name associated with the Sefira Malkhut). One should therefore meditate on the name Adonay (ADNY) binding it to the name YHWH (“Yahweh”, associated with the Sefira Tiferet) in the Universe of Asiah. He should then bind this to the name Ehyeh (AHYH “I Am” associates with the Sefira Keter) in the Universe of Asiyah. He should then meditate on this, elevating the name Ehyeh of Asiyah, and binding it to Adonay of Yetsirah. Adonay of Yetsirah should then be bound to YHWH of Yetsirah. (One proceeds in this manner) step by step, until he reaches Ehyeh of Atzilut. He should then bind Ehyeh of Atzilut to the very highest level, which is the Ein Sof”.⁴⁵

This theme of the step-by-step ascent through the successive levels of consciousness is not exclusively Jewish. It also appears in Gnosticism and in Hellenistic Hermeticism, which have undoubtedly influenced the evolution of Kabbalah. It is also the source of the later development of the non-Jewish Hermetic tradition that has led to the emergence of modern occultism. However, unlike the other movements, concerned with the negation of the world and personal transcendence, the Kabbalah constantly pursued the repair of the world as a whole.

If the *Tikkun Olam* has a positive aspect, related to the restoration of the rightful connection between the things in their true unity, the process has a negative aspect as well, for which Lurianic Kabbalah uses the term *Berur* (textually “selection”). *Berur* is the separation and elimination of the demonic forces, of the other side (*Sitra Ahra*). According to the Lurianic theory of the ritual, Torah is intended to constantly provoke a rejection and progressive elimination of the *Sitra Ahra*, which is now mixed up in all things and threatens to destroy them from the inside. That is why the *Kavanah* ritual warns against the dangers and gaps the mystic can come across on his way. From this perspective, the end of the Morning Prayer, when the initiate would throw himself to the ground, constituted an enterprise that could have endangered his life. After having reached the peak of his fervor and after feeling included in the divine name that he had “united”, the mystic had to jump into the *Sitra Ahra* to free the holy sparks imprisoned in the *klippot*.

⁴⁴ One may identify here an obvious and striking similarity with the Mantras of Indian Tantra and even with Gnostic practices.

⁴⁵ Kaplan, Meditation 225.

“Only the perfect Tzaddik can fulfill this meditation, because, for his merits, he is worthy of descending and undertaking those selections in the Klippot, the realms of the “other side”, even against their will. Otherwise, when he put his soul at stake and sends it down there, in the Klippot, he may not only be unable to bring out the souls fallen there but he may also lose his own soul to those realms”.⁴⁶

Given the importance of God’s names, the kabbalistic traditions requested that they be taught from master to disciple in a special initiatory ritual. Since the mere utterance of the divine names may suffice for a creative act as well as for a destructive one, such teaching could only be oral. The tradition was probably older but the kabbalists were the first to mention it in writing. In one of his books, Eleazar of Worms described in detail such an initiation, underlining the fact that it was necessary first of all that before the lesson the two would sink in a running water of 40 feet and wash themselves and secondly that the teaching process itself would take place above the water (gazing at the water). Another theurgic rite, “the dressing of the name”, consisting in the manufacturing, following certain instructions, of a physical mantle with magical values that would give the adept an irresistible power and whose use was necessarily accompanied by the invocation of the related angels, was also strictly connected to the presence of water. The water symbolism was probably taken over from earlier *Merkabah* mysticism. However, regarded from this perspective water loses its quality of danger and becomes creative, just like the fire in the story of the two rabbis who study the “Account of the Chariot”, where instead of burning the trees it makes them sing.

Moshe Idel speaks⁴⁷ of the presence in Jewish mysticism of a “capture theurgy”. Related to the concept of *Shekhinah* and to the effort to bring back and perpetuate God’s presence in the world and in the Community of Israel by a human-divine co-participation, this theurgy has its source in the Hebrew Book of Enoch. Here one may find an interesting description of the magical art, which angels Uzza, Azza and Azziel passed on to mankind, so that people could attract the celestial forces on earth and use them. In his turn, Metatron is thought to support the use of magical techniques in view of revealing the secrets of the lower and higher worlds and the mysteries of knowledge to mankind. Although this looks like (and indeed is) a sort of idolatry, the technique seems to have been considered effective, since there are even descriptions of instruments used to this end. It is possible that, following the same pattern, through its con-

⁴⁶ Scholem, Cabala 151, quoting from Chaim Vital, *Sha’ar ha-Kavanot*. This reminds of the “Pardes” view on the dangers befalling the mystic and of the outcome the enterprise had for Elisha (Aher).

⁴⁷ Idel, Cabala 230.

struction and the religious service given inside it, the Temple could have served to attract and perpetuate the *Shekhinah* amidst the Community of Israel.

God's descent was conceived as part of the revelation process of Torah's secret. Not by chance the ritual took place between the two Cherubs, which symbolized the perfect union (including the sexual aspect) and God's will, in the absence of which they would have remained separated, but also the dynamic human participation in the divine activity. This is ultimately an attempt to prompt revelation by magical techniques. After the disappearance of the Temple, based on the outlook that having been created in the likeness of God man was a microcosm, a new idea emerged, which regarded the human copy as a potential replacement for the Cherubs. Kabbalah exploited this opportunity in the mystical-magical rituals that prepared the mystic for union with God, both physically and psychically. Only the perfect man can become the recipient of the divine potencies, by attracting the *Shekhinah*.⁴⁸ In the words of Moses of Leon (13th century), man must become a throne on which a superior throne can be seated. This way he can receive the divine inflow, which allows him to take part in the theurgic repair of the *Sefirot*. Joseph Gikatilla (13th century) considers that any of man's limbs could become a throne for the celestial entity to which it corresponds, if the mystic purified himself and observed the precepts. In the opinion of Abraham ben Eliezer ha-Levy (15th - 16th century), after a perfect religious life the mystic's flesh becomes transparent and therefore able to receive the *Sefirot*. This religious view does not exclude at all the magical techniques; on the contrary, it includes them for the same purpose – to attract the divine forces. The prayer ritual was completed with the utterance of the divine names designed to perpetuate God's presence once caught. The mystic would thus become a member of the *Shekhinah*.

Another applicability of this type of practical, magical and capture-type of Kabbalah is identified by Moshe Idel⁴⁹ in a kabbalistic tradition developed after the anti-Jewish persecutions of 1391 in Spain that culminated in a series of writings published shortly before the expulsion of 1492, amongst which the best-known is *Sefer ha-Malakh ha-Meshiv*. Here, for the first time, the kabbalists explicitly assure the reader that it is possible to determine the coming of Messiah by means of a magic act able to break the course of history and provoke a radical change in the natural order. In this book the mystic does not consider himself to be the author of the expounded ideas but a mere instrument through which his revelation is passed on to the entire world. A particular feature of this type of Kabbalah is the presence of demonic magic, which

⁴⁸ This is also valid in the relation between the Tzaddik (righteous man) and the *Shekhinah* (female aspect of the divine) in Hassidism.

⁴⁹ Idel, *Mesianism* 47.

culminates in the demonization of Christianity (as a perfectly symmetrical feedback to the Christian demonization of Judaism) but also of medieval philosophy and science, whose representatives were regarded as embodiments of Satan. These kabbalists pursued the restoration of a pure Judaism both culturally and spiritually, considering that the proximity of the Messianic era authorized the disclosure of all the secrets occulted after the exile.⁵⁰ The mystical path was to them a channel through which they would receive magical recipes for the defeat of Christianity. The revelation of the divinity allowed for the descent of a superior magic, essential for the neutralization of the evil forces and the attainment of redemption. For these kabbalists, too, magic was a means of separation from the *Sitra Ahra*. The difference from other kabbalistic approaches lies in the fact that here, the participants in the apocalyptic war are not the people but the evil forces themselves. The central idea of this tradition was that the Messianic era had already arrived and that for the embodiment of Messiah the only necessary action was to defeat the evil forces by vows uttered in pre-established ceremonies and by use of various magical techniques. Just like in the case of classical mysticism, even this magical effort was collective and had a distinct ethical dimension. This type of magic seems to have been largely abandoned after the expulsion from Spain.⁵¹

Unlike in other circumstances, in the cases described so far the magical techniques were used to allow the mystic to take part in the divine activity and to obtain union with God respectively. Whether he used combinations and permutations of letters and divine names or even instruments, the mystic's aim was exclusively religious. It may be said that the main technique of this "capture theurgy" was the magical reading of the Torah. In fact, let us not forget that, as previously shown in this study, Torah is the basis of the universe's existence and its actualization puts order into chaos. Since the Ten Commandments are regarded as a manifestation of the ten aspects of the divine, it is obvious that they – and implicitly those who observe them – sustain the entire world.

2.2 Methods: Gematria, Temurah, Notarikon

At this point we should review some of the methods used in the mystical and magical reading of the Torah. In his analysis on the evolution of Jewish thought, and implicitly Jewish mysticism, Moshe Idel speaks of a process of arcanization,⁵² showing that although Judaism was initially a mostly exoteric

⁵⁰ This refers to the Roman period.

⁵¹ M. Idel argues that this was the result of the fact that some kabbalists considered this approach a mistake, which triggered the exile (Idel, *Mesianism* 52).

⁵² Idel, *Hermeneutics* 165.

religion, during the ages it assumed some of the most complex esoteric expressions known in religion in general. This swinging from exo- to esoteric led to the emergence of often in disagreement, but always profound, forms of thought. Although it contributed, on the one hand, to the emergence of new forms of conceptualization of the sacred text, the arcanization process also determined, on the other hand, the development of the first systematic treatments of the modes of interpreting it. This systematic hermeneutics was designed to prove the connection between the new forms of interpretive literature and the earlier, more traditional ones.

Regarded from this perspective, the numerical interpretation of the canonic text is the most intra-textual of the hermeneutical methods, because it starts from the assumption that through the hidden numerical correspondences between its elements, the text elucidates itself. Unlike the narrative approaches, which infused new meanings into older texts, the numeric approaches were often meant to reinforce the uniqueness of the sacred text, and to reveal, through the disclosure of such affinities, the divine wisdom.

Various scholars have claimed that the Hebrew numerical exegesis was probably taken over from the Pythagorean speculations. But, as Moshe Idel underlines, in the case of Judaism the mystic's interest did not stop at the mathematical level, which considered the letter's numerical value in itself, but went further on to the semantic one, which considered the affinity between words with the same numerical value.⁵³ The primary purpose of Gematria, then, was to compare the semantic values and not the numerical values of the words. A second purpose of the numerological exercise was to extract information from the text by transforming words into figures. The most famous instance of use of Gematria in this regard was the deduction of the precise measure of the huse size of the divine body from a biblical phrase.

Although Gematria was not a kabbalistic invention, being inherited from older forms of Jewish mysticism, a first definition of it is given by Eleazar of Worms:

“Gay means in Greek number, and matrya – wisdom. Another interpretation: Gay means a valley, matrya means mountains, namely if you throw the mountain into the valley, it will be equal. So also you should do to the Torah and you should find out what the sages said, or in the Midrash or in the Talmud, by the way of Gematria, or by the way of allegory... But you should not resort too much to Gematria – because even the clowns do – less people will deride you”.⁵⁴

Based on the numerical equivalence between “Elohim” on the one hand and “throne”, but also “judgment”, on the other hand, Eleazar shows by means of

⁵³ Idel, *Hermeneutics* 171.

⁵⁴ Quoted by Idel, *Hermeneutics* 172.

Gematria why this divine name is associated with *Sefira Din*. The idea of this correspondence was not new and whether Eleazar invented this demonstration or he only inherited it, it provides an example of the use of Gematria to underline the relation between elements of the same conceptual system in an intra-corporeal strategy. By his reference to the clowns the kabbalist emphasized the need for a conservative and careful approach of this technique. Nevertheless, this does not mean that Gematria applications may not lead to the emergence of new conceptions. The juxtaposition, based on numerical equivalence, of elements between which there is no visible relation may sometimes lead to unexpected connections that are, nevertheless, acceptable from the conservative viewpoint.

At the same time, however, it is also possible that the use of Gematria may alter the hidden meaning of the text by turning the allusion in verses into a pernicious matter, as Nahmanides (13th century) underlines.⁵⁵ Aware that the use of this technique may lead to aberrations (and not only from the point of view of religion), Nahmanides is, in his turn, the adept of a conservative Gematria, which should not generate new ideas. To him, numerical calculation operates rather as a mnemotechnique preserving the secrets of the oral Torah given by God to Moses on Mount Sinai.

At the opposite pole we find Abraham Abulafia who grants numerical methods a much more radical applicability, using various means to deconstruct the text before reconstructing it, providing entirely new meanings in an inter-corporeal approach. Numerology may therefore be used in both conservative and radical approaches. Symbolism and allegory are conservative from the point of view of the text's structure and radical due to the inter-corporeal tendencies. Moshe Idel shows⁵⁶ that, if the German mystics known as the *Hasidei Ashkenaz* used a radical form of Gematria, taking the interpreted elements out of the context and ignoring their canonic order for the sake of an intra-textual relation, the ecstatic kabbalists applied this radicalism to both methods – intra-textual and inter-corporeal. To Abulafia, Gematria is more than an exegesis of the sacred text – it is a form of knowledge and understanding of reality that goes much farther than philosophy. If for the Greeks numerology was a means to measure nature, for the kabbalists together with letters and names it provided an easier and more direct access to the essence of reality. But this is not about the external, tangible reality, but about the one contained in the sacred text. This approach starts from the outlook that language is not just a means of reflection but also of understanding, and considers that the information included in the text is superior to any natural science.

⁵⁵ Quoted by Idel, *Hermeneutics* 174.

⁵⁶ Idel, *Hermeneutics* 179.

It is interesting to note that in his book *Sefer ha-Hokhmah* Eleazar of Worms describes seventy-three ways of interpreting the Bible. The author underlines that he has taken them over from the esoteric tradition inherited from his master, Rabbi Yehuda ha-Hasid, and mentions that they represent the seventy-three gates of wisdom, which decode the secrets of the fifty gates of understanding. For the kabbalists, then, the exegetical methods are not only methods to elicit secrets from a text but also secret topics in themselves. Although in fact an exoteric exegetical method, also used in the rabbinic literature, in the Kabbalah numerology was considered part of the esoteric tradition.⁵⁷ This outlook was natural in an environment in which the revelation of the occulted recipes was meant for the specially trained initiates only, being dangerous for the rest of the world.

Numerical calculation does not change the word but enriches it with semantic charge by confronting it with other words with the same numerical value. Gematria preserves, therefore, the text's stability. Entirely different is the case of another form of exegesis, by definition radical, the combination of letters. Like Gematria and for the same reasons, this method was considered secret by the kabbalists, although there were mentions about it in the Talmud. The combination of letters was not regarded as a simple exegetical method but as the essence of the language structure. For Abraham Abulafia this was evident: *gematria tzeruf otyot = shivim leshonot* or, in translation, "letter combination" is mathematically equal with "seventy languages", which, let us remember here, represents in the kabbalistic tradition the number of languages existing on earth at the moment when Moses received the Torah from God on Mount Sinai.

The combination of letters consists, in fact, in two main methods: Temurah – permutation of the letters inside a word or replacement of a letter with another – and Notarikon (or *tzerufei 'otiyot* in Hebrew) – combination of the initials of the words of a sentence in a new word or, on the contrary, creation of a sentence from the letters of a word. Evidently, in both case we are dealing with a game designed to facilitate Torah's secrets. As previously shown in this study, for the kabbalists Torah was woven from letters placed in a different order than their real succession. Their (re)combination was considered to be a path to the knowledge and even experience of God. On the other hand, however, the method was used, together with Gematria, by the ecstatic kabbalists for mystical purposes – to determine the descent of the divine inflow. The first such mention appeared in the 16th century in a treatise of Rabbi Yehuda Albotini but the outlook was

⁵⁷ In Hermeneutics 180. M. Idel analyzes numerology's affiliation with the esoteric tradition, following the evolution of this exegetical method from its primary forms, identified in Mesopotamian practices, through the rabbinic literature up to the Kabbalah.

probably older. In this sense it was used in both mystical and magical practices until the late Hassidic period.

2.3 Applications: The Golem

As mentioned above, there was always a practical magic side to Jewish mysticism. This was not reduced to the mere use of figures, or letters and names combination and permutation techniques only, but also included various forms of universal magic. In a book entitled *The Onyx Stone*,⁵⁸ Joseph Tzaiah (16th century), speaks of the association between the ten *Sefirot* and the fingers, in a genuine treatise of chiromancy. Moreover, for meditation on the *Sefirot* he proposes a system of magic squares based on numerology, in which each row represents a house and each number a room, and the mystic passes from one “house” to another in search of the light. In his turn, Joseph Karo used magical techniques to foretell the future.

The purposes of the kabbalists’ magical practices were not always exclusively religious. There are, in Jewish mysticism in general and in Kabbalah in particular, many magical recipes, with quite precise instructions regarding the steps one must undertake to fulfill a creative act. Although this provided the basis for a long literature describing supposedly true stories about such creations, for the perspective of this study relevant is their symbolic aspect only, just as in Jewish alchemy relevant is the quest for gold as a mystical rather than a practical enterprise.

The best-known model of human creation is undoubtedly the Golem. The representation of the Golem has varied during its historical evolution. Initially regarded as a simple legend, it was later transformed into the object of an initiation ritual that confirmed the adept’s mastering of the esoteric science, just to end by degenerating back into a telluric myth, in the hands of the uninitiated. Gershom Scholem identifies a quite detailed reproduction of the legend in an account published at the beginning of the 19th century in the newspaper *Zeitung für Einsiedler* (Paper for the Hermits).⁵⁹

“After saying certain prayers and fasting for a number of days, the Polish Jews make a human face out of clay or argyle, which, upon uttering the miraculous *Shem ha-Meforash* [God’s name] above him, should come to life. True, he cannot speak, but he understands some of the things he is told or commanded. They call him Golem and use him as a helper for household works. But he is never allowed to leave the house. On his forehead it is written *Emet* [truth]; he grows day by day, becomes bigger and stronger than the others in the house, even though in the beginning he was so little. Therefore they wipe the first letter off his forehead so that only *met* [dead]

⁵⁸ Published in 1538 (according to Cohn-Sherbok, *Judaică* 172).

⁵⁹ Scholem, *Cabala* 177.

would remain there. After that he falls down, to be dissolved, once again, into clay. The Golem of one man grew so tall, and he still let him grow on and on, until he could no longer reach his forehead. For fear of that, he asked his servant to take off his boots, thinking he could touch his forehead once he bent down. Indeed so it happened and the first letter was wiped off, but that large amount of clay fell over the Jew and crushed him”.

The parallelism with the divine creation of the first man is evident. The magician who creates a Golem follows in fact the biblical recipe. Nevertheless, it is arguable whether this enterprise is, in each case, an attempt to imitate God’s creation or, on the contrary, to compete with it. The kabbalistic conceptions regarding this creation act vary. Although they all agree that Adam was created from *adama* (earth), the quality of the raw material is regarded differently. To some exegetes of the sacred text this was not just any kind of earth, but the cleanest and finest clay taken from the center of the Earth, which unified in it all the elements. This idea appears in the Judaic Hagadah but also in the writings of Philon of Alexandria. Another tradition, however, speaks about clay taken from all over the Earth, which is why its adepts concluded that in Adam was contained the entire world.⁶⁰

On the other hand, in the Bible (Psalms 138,16) Adam himself is called Golem, but there the term is used to name what is yet uncreated, yet untouched by the divine breath (in a state of potentiality). In various writings analyzed by Gershom Scholem⁶¹ emerges even the idea of the existence in Adam, during the creation process, of a telluric spirit – the Golemic state – that preceded the inflow of the divine breath. In this state – sometimes associated with the *nefesh* aspect of the soul – he could have perceived the things but not influence them. That is why the man-made Golem may understand and carry out his creator’s commands but he cannot speak or take the initiative. Moreover, some Midrashic texts proposed the image of a Golem of cosmic dimensions, stretching from one end of the world to the other, which could explain why in later descriptions of the Golems they would grow endlessly and had to be stopped by returning them to ashes. This outlook goes even further, maintaining that Lilith, as Adam’s first wife, was in her turn made of clay, which would justify her claim to equality with her husband. Not by chance Jewish demonologic magic – and implicitly black magic – started with the utterance by Lilith of the Divine Name. What is interesting from this perspective is the fact that in this context the utterance of the Divine Name stands for “straying from”, and giving up, the divine in favor of the demonic.

⁶⁰ *Midrash Abkir* quoted by Scholem, *Cabala* 181.

⁶¹ Scholem, *Cabala* 182.

It is obvious that, in the case of the Golem, the creative capacity is achieved by means of magic using letters and divine names. Starting from the kabbalistic outlook that Torah is the tool of creation and, although the passages and the letters' order have been modified, the initiate can still read in its prescriptions for the creation of objects and beings, the recipe for manufacturing a Golem is, supposedly, quite simple. Once a Golem is built up from clay, the creator must inscribe the word *emet* [truth] on his forehead, in a physical ritual accompanied by the utterance of the divine names. When he begins to grow out of control, the creator shall return him to ashes by wiping the first letter (*aleph*) of the word on his forehead, thus leaving the new word *met* (dead). The difference between the human and the divine creation, then, lies in the last step of the process, the inflow of breath (the *ruach* aspect of the soul), inaccessible to man. This absence is also manifest in the fact that in most cases the Golem cannot use language (representation of the rational soul = life).

The conceptions about the Golem are mostly based on a Talmudic legend relating that Rava created a man and sent him to Rabbi Zera. The fact that the man did not speak told Zera that he was the result of a magic act and therefore had to be destroyed. A second story in the Talmud that has provided the grounds for the development of this myth is that of the two Rabbis, Hanina and Oshaha, who, on each Shabbat eve, used to create, following the instructions in the book of creation, a three-quarter grown veal, which they would then eat. But the most important source of the Golem-related speculations remains *Sefer Yetsirah*. Here it is mentioned that "all that was created and spoken came out of a name", evidently God's. The universe, tells *Sefer Yetsirah*, was created with the help of the 22 letters, just like its miniature replica: man, so that between the two there would be a perfect correspondence (each part of the human body is associated with a letter).⁶² Therefore it is not surprising to see that the description of the manner in which the letters were used as structural elements in the creative process was interpreted as a key to magic practices. Moreover, the text accounts for a successful attempt: Abraham "looked, watched and saw, searched and understood and sketched and inscribed and combined and made [which means created] and succeeded".⁶³ This information, often taken in its speculative sense, may just as well represent a profound knowledge (mastering) of the procedures whereby, assisted by the power to understand the interdependence between objects and the potency of letters and words, "anyone" could repeat creation in its complete form.

Mentions about the creation of a man following the biblical recipe re-appear in the 11th century works of exeget Rashi of Troyes, who compares the creation

⁶² For a detailed description see Idel, Golem 53-58.

⁶³ Quoted by Idel, Golem 59.

techniques expounded in *Sefer Yetsirah*⁶⁴ with the ones expounded in the Talmud, but also in the better known commentary on the Book of Creation of Yehuda ben Barzilai (11th - 12th century), who underlines its quality of textbook of magic. Nevertheless, the first to grant major importance to the myth and to turn it into an initiatory ritual are the German Pietists. In a translation of *Sefer Yetsirah* they re-actualize an older interpretation of Genesis 12,5, which states that the verse “Abram and Sarai took on their journey westwards all the souls they had made in Haran” actually refers to a practical application of the Patriarch’s knowledge of creative magic.⁶⁵ The same German Pietists return into linguistic circulation the term Golem to name the creatures made in the image of man by means of magical recipes. At the same time, however, they are also the first to mention the interdiction regarding the practical use of the recipe, which marks the transformation of the legend into an initiation ritual. The Preface to an anonymous commentary on *Sefer Yetsirah*, called Pseudo-Saadia, quotes a late *Midrash*⁶⁶ that describes how Ben Sira and his father, Jeremiah, built a man in an initiation process, using the word *emet*. A similar description can be found in *Sefer ha-Gematriot*, a collection of traditions compiled by Rabbi Judah ha Hasid’s disciples. Not by chance the process takes place in the presence of two or three adepts, in compliance with the instruction in *Mishna Haggigah* 2,1 banning the revelation of the secrets of creation before more than two people. Actually, the story is recounted in many exegeses of the Book of Creation. Among these an important place is reserved to a pseudo-epigraph of Yehuda ben Batira (12th century), which stands as proof that there was a connection between the German kabbalists and the French ones in Languedoc. This text states quite clearly that turning the symbolic ritual of creation of a Golem into a physical reality would be like turning against God, because since the Golem is created with the formula *YHWH Elohim Emet* (YHWH true God), when wiping letter *aleph* off, the conclusion remains that God is dead.

The first complete recipe for the manufacturing of a Golem, containing extremely detailed instructions, seems to have been published by Eleazar of Worms, in *Peulat ha-Yetsirah*, although the complete tables of the alphabetic combinations are missing, precisely in order to avoid misinterpretations and profanation. But in this case the creation act takes place mainly in the sphere of meditation. The ritualistic character of Golemic creation is also obvious in Pseudo-Saadia, which gives, in its turn, practical information on what needs to be done, including the succession of reciting and the combinations of divine names and vowels. In addition to that, Pseudo-Saadia introduces a new and unprecedented

⁶⁴ Zucker, *Sefer*.

⁶⁵ Quoted by Idel, *Golem* 63.

⁶⁶ Analyzed by Scholem in *Cabala* 196.

instruction, that the Golem must be buried in the earth so as to stand up from it, which, in Scholem's view, seems to indicate the penetration into the myth of a symbolism of rebirth. This text is also the only source mentioning that the Golem is endowed with *neshamah* soul. Other kabbalistic texts, which seem to have inspired Abraham Abulafia, give the myth an ecstatic dimension, turning the Golemic ritual (with all its components, including the respiratory and body techniques) into a ritual related to the union with the divine name.

In its original intent, then, as it was imagined in the initiatory circles of German Pietists and French kabbalists, the creation of a Golem did not have a practical purpose only but also a spiritual one – to prove the creative power of letters and numbers and thereby of the divine names. In fact, most texts underline the fact that any human creation is deemed to be incomplete, since true creation is accessible to God only. On the other hand, the danger of such an enterprise does not lie, in this outlook (though it does in later traditions), in the uncontrollable telluric force of the Golem, but in the fact that, as the accounts show, the inappropriate application of the magic recipe leads not to the distortion of the Golem, but to the destruction of his creator.

Medieval mysticism (like that of Yohanan Alemanno, 15th century) marks a shift in the evolution of the Golem mythology. As Moshe Idel underlines, “the medieval technique for creating a Golem was the Jewish answer to astral and talismanic magic,”⁶⁷ being obviously influenced by Hermeticism.

In his turn, Moses Cordovero brings a new conception in the legend, considering that the Golem cannot have any kind of soul but only vitality, which means that his destruction does not break Torah's precepts. In his view, the magic recipe is used to raise a telluric force that, in fact, does not abandon its fundamental state. The only thing that moves it is the superior, divine light reflected in it. Therefore to him the creation of a Golem has no spiritual significance.⁶⁸

Straying from the practical tradition, the kabbalists start speaking of the Golemic creation as of something that might have happened in the past but which is no longer accessible to them. If the previous kabbalistic writings might have indicated that the mystical-magical practice of creating a Golem was once accessible to any initiate who knew the secret, as of this moment the view changes. Accounts start to flourish about supposedly successful attempts to manufacture Golems by cotemporary people, which are mixed up with Christian motives and often reflect black magic practices. In a paradoxical process, this idea is applied backwards, to the past, leading to strange situations like the one in which Solomon ibn Gabirol (11th century) is being said (in the

⁶⁷ Idel, Golem 270.

⁶⁸ Idel, Golem 421.

17th century) to have created a female Golem to help him with his household. This way, the mystical aspect of this enterprise was abandoned.

Instead of Conclusion

All the theories mentioned in this study show that, during the evolution of Jewish mysticism in general and in the medieval period in particular, Torah's mystical essence was mostly rendered by the various manifestations of an occultation phenomenon. Whether we refer to the occultation by symbols, the existence of 4 levels of reading, 70 meanings of letters and words and 600,000 personal decoding keys, the occultation by games that change the letters' order or the physical occultation of a letter or even two books, Torah's mystical sense was ultimately based on an absence, just as mysticism itself is founded on an absence – the greatest – of the divine, due to the fact that man has lost direct touch with God. Jewish mysticism in general and the Kabbalistic movement in particular thus aimed at making up for this loss, recovering the connection and restoring the harmony of the original order by use of letters and numbers, seen as the main instruments of creation. In this attempt these tools acquired not only mystical but also magical abilities, becoming capable of manipulating the divine, for better or for worse. Whether used constructively or destructively, their power was obvious and to many Jewish mystics they constituted the engine that moved the world.

Summary

In Jewish interpretation of the Holy Scripture, the article discusses the importance of the concept of letters and numbers as the basic instruments of creation. This approach to scriptures is seen as a form of creation and hence creates a certain liberty in the reading of the Torah's mystical sense. A deeper meaning is hidden in the text that awaits revelation by the learned and prepared sage. This study surveys the various attempts to disclose the secrets concealed in the Torah, i.e. the use of symbols, the existence of four levels of reading, the seventy meanings of letters and words, the 600,000 personal decoding keys, the interchange of the sequence of characters, and the supposition that e.g. a single character or even two whole books could be missing from the Torah. The author concludes that these are perceived as hermeneutical means to enter and understand the divine. Special attention is given to the methods based on letters and numbers which the kabbalists developed to access not only the divine secret concealed in the text but also the divine itself, i.e. gematria, temurah and notarikon. The last section of this article is devoted to the magical use of letters and numbers in a practical exercise: the Golem, seen as a (limited) imitation of (or competition with?) the divine creation.

Zusammenfassung

Der Beitrag befasst sich mit der Bedeutung von Schriftauslegung in der jüdischen Tradition, wobei besonders auf die Vorstellung von Buchstaben und Zahlen als grund-

genden Schöpfungsinstrumenten eingegangen wird. Diese Deutungsstrategie wird im Judentum als schöpferischer Akt verstanden, was Freiheiten in der Erschließung des mystischen Textsinns der Tora erlaubt. Unter der Haube des auszulegenden Texts befindet sich eine tiefere Bedeutung, die der Weise erschließen kann. Im vorliegenden Beitrag werden die Versuche der Weisen vorgestellt, Einblick in die Geheimnisse der Tora zu gewinnen: die Verwendung von Symbolen, die vier Ebenen des Lesens, die sieben Bedeutungen von Buchstaben und Worten, die 600.000 Schlüssel, Verschiebungen der Buchstabenfolge und die Annahme, daß ein einzelner Buchstabe oder auch zwei ganze Bücher in der Tora fehlen könnten. Es zeigt sich, daß diese Methoden als hermeneutische Ansätze fungieren, die es erlauben, in das Göttliche einzudringen und es zu verstehen. Ein besonderes Augenmerk liegt auf den kabbalistischen Methoden, welche auf der Gleichsetzung von Buchstaben und Zahlenwerten beruhen. Gematria, Temura und Notarikon wurden entwickelt, um sowohl die im Text verborgenen göttlichen Geheimnisse als auch das Göttliche selbst zu erschliessen. Der letzte Teil des Aufsatzes wurde einem Beispiel der magischen Verwendung von Buchstaben und Zahlen gewidmet, dem Golem als einer eingeschränkten Nachahmung der göttlichen Schöpfung.

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