1 • Mysticism and the Kabbalah

At the turn of the first millennium, philosophical questions engaged the attention of many Jews. It is beyond the scope of this book to explore what motivated them to immerse themselves in philosophical pursuits in preference to other intellectual currents of the cultural world. Suffice is to say that they did so by taking several different routes. Some attached themselves to the Aristotelian framework, while others were affiliated with the Neoplatonic one; some emerged as original thinkers, while others simply responded to current philosophical themes in an attempt to adjust the intellectual Jewish world to philosophical thinking. Questions concerning the Godhead, the Creation, the World, Man, and so on, aroused intellectual curiosity. The Kabbalah, which surfaced at the end of the twelfth century,[1] provided its own answers to such philosophical questions. The uniqueness of the Kabbalah lies in the nature of its response, as well as in the method of its explorations. While the nature of the response often meets philosophical criteria and reflects an awareness of, and inspiration from, the realm of philosophy, what binds up these quests with the world of mysticism is the method of obtaining the answers.

Though the new, kabbalistic current relates to philosophical questions, a considerable portion of its speculative thought is devoted to the religious world of man, especially that of the Jewish person, and in this respect too, this current differs from its philosophical counterpart.[2] Thus Kabbalah stands out as *Jewish* mysticism; it is imprinted by the seal of the Jewish religion, along with its values and particular way of life.

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The total unity of the contents, means, and objectives at least distinguishes the Kabbalah of the second millennium, which manifests itself as a mystical *current,* from its counterpart in the first millennium (particularly during its first half), which is more inclined toward mystical *experience*. To a large extent, the later stage of the Kabbalah is our primary concern in the next chapters of this book.

These chapters introduce the major themes of the Kabbalah, without going into detail about the sources of individual concepts and values in Kabbalah, or of how they unfolded. My main goal is to provide an overview that focuses on the common denominator while acknowledging and clarifying some opposite views that also struck root among the Kabbalists. In this presentation, special attention is given to the very phenomenon of mysticism and its human complexity.

The Kabbalah is marked by numerous philosophical trends and a variety of different, and sometimes contrary, views. Despite this divergence, certain shared elements—the common spiritual basis, the attitude toward the sources of knowledge, the particular manner of attaining mystical knowledge, the underlying conceptual-symbolic system, and particularly the sense of inner continuity that distinguishes the kabbalistic figures—allow us to assign these wide-ranging currents of thought to a single comprehensive outlook. Nonetheless, one must bear in mind that the Kabbalah is much more than a mere outlook, however profound in perception and singular in its mythical and anthropomorphic mode of presentation. Essentially, the Kabbalah is a way of life and a culture in itself. Symbolic thinking and ecstatic experiences require man's total devotion. They lead toward the achievement of lofty goals, and, under their guidance, all aspects of the religious way of life are illuminated with the light of the mystical world.

WHAT IS KABBALAH?

Historically, the term "Kabbalah" denotes a comprehensive religious movement of various methods and directions, which is rooted in the tannaitic tradition as crystallized at the end of the Second Temple period. In the course of time, the Kabbalah shaped the life of many Jews and exerted a strong influence on Jewish culture. Segments of Jewish prayers, much of the liturgical procedure, various religious customs, and popular

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sayings, all of which became part and parcel of Judaism, however obscure their origin seems to be, can actually be traced down to the teaching of Kabbalah. The great talmudic scholars were affiliated with the kabbalistic school of thought. Among them are the Rabad (R. Abraham ben David of Posquières), the Ramban (Naḥmanides), the Rashba (R. Solomon ben Abraham ibn Adret), R. Joseph Karo, R. Moses Cordovero, R. Ḥayyim Joseph Azulay, R. Elijah, the Gaon of Vilna, R. Ḥayyim of Volozhin, and Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Lyady. These luminaries in the field of Halakhah also played a crucial role in the development of the Kabbalah.

Every form of mysticism is connected with a particular religion, and this is particularly true with the Kabbalah. A somewhat parallel current of thought, namely Jewish philosophy, never attained the status of the Kabbalah, probably because the Kabbalah was deeply rooted in the Jewish spiritual heritage without estranging itself from any of its branches. Whereas the talmudic Halakhah was almost outside the philosopher's scope of discussion and the Aggadah often proved to be problematic for him in its formulations and ideas, the Kabbalah based itself on both the Halakhah and the Aggadah while providing its own interpretations, which were at times both daring and far-reaching, to phenomena or concepts drawn from the long-standing tradition. Philosophy somewhat disregarded the practical commandments. It imparted the light of reason to a few individuals while confusing many others, who turned away from the old without reaching out to the new. It thus opened the way to the "emancipation" of the Jews, but also led to a loss of Jewish identity and even to assimilation (as happened at the time of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain and during the period of the Enlightenment). The Kabbalah, on the other hand, contributed a good deal to the strengthening of religious awareness in daily practice.

But what is the nature of the Kabbalah? It is difficult to formulate an inclusive definition that will exhaust the whole range of phenomena and currents populating the world of Kabbalah. To adopt a partial, though important, definition,[3] the Kabbalah adopts a religio-mystical point of view that impinges on every area of existence and seeks solutions to the mysteries of the world and the vicissitudes of life. At the very core of Kabbalah lies the mystery of the knowledge of the Godhead, *raza dimehemanuta* (the secret of faith), from which all the other subjects of speculative investigation branch out. Kabbalah deals with the hidden

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realms of the life of the Godhead and the life of man as an individual person and the relationship between them.

In rabbinic literature, the term Kabbalah is used in two senses. The first refers to the words of the prophets and the Hagiographa, as differentiated from the Pentateuch; the second denotes the tradition of the oral Torah, as distinguished from the written Torah. These meanings of "Kabbalah" are interrelated, for essentially both of them convey the difference between the written Torah, which has to be followed to the letter, without adding or subtracting anything, and the oral teaching, which is expandable.

In the beginning of the thirteenth century, individual sages used the word Kabbalah in reference to particular secrets of tradition that are divulged in private or transmitted by whispering "from mouth to mouth," or rather from mouth to ear, so that they reach only the elect. The things that are communicated in this way are things that by their very nature cannot be understood by everyone.

In order to conceal them from the masses, or from those individuals who are not worthy of them, they are told in secret. That is to say, Kabbalah means the "receiving" of secret contents. The question that obviously arises is why these things should be kept secret. In order to explain this, let me first clarify some related phenomena.

WHAT IS MYSTICISM?

"As all faces of people are unlike, so too their opinions."[4] Human beings, just like the elements of the cosmos, are defined within a hierarchical order.[5] On a much smaller scale, every human society, however superficially homogeneous, is many-sided. Similarly, any religious system is characterized by diversity because the individual members who belong to it differ in their religious level. To give an analogy, an army is composed of several different corps, each consisting of numerous individuals of various ranks. Within the military hierarchy, all of these individuals, from the private and up to the chief of staff, fall under the category of "soldiers." When a general command is issued, each soldier takes part in executing it, but does so in his own manner and according to his given character. In the Sinai revelation, said Rabbi Ḥayyim Vital (sixteenth century), sixty myriads Israelites heard the Torah, and consequently

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there are sixty myriads of interpretations of the Torah—each individual produced a unique interpretation that derived from the very root of his soul (*Sha'ar Ma'amrey Razal,* fol. 19a). Speaking along the same lines, a Hasidic rabbi once said: "On the third Sabbath meal, when I deliver a sermon in front of three hundred persons, it is as though I deliver three hundred sermons."

It follows that natural stratification is the hallmark of every human society, and the same must be true of the religious society. Whether gentiles or Jews, people differ in terms of their level of religious affinity. In every community, there are those who attempt to get much closer to God. Under certain circumstances, this attempt is qualified as "mysticism." According to the *Hebrew Encyclopedia,* mysticism is

> A term denoting a category of religious phenomena (experiences and doctrines) that does not lend itself to a precise definition and is related—despite numerous significant differences—to an array of phenomena that are found in most religions. Generally speaking, the term "mysticism" conveys an intensive inner experience of the supreme religious reality, as distinguished from strict observance of the "exteriority" of the forms of objective religion (such as the cultic system, the organizational-ecclesiastic system, the conceptual-dogmatic system). . . . Most of the personalities in the history of religion who are designated as "mystics" sought to penetrate the core of inner spirituality in their religion.

It is important to add that, generally speaking, the mystic's quest leads him to explore in depth both poles of religion, namely God who commands, on the one hand, and man who obeys, on the other.

The mystic adheres to some specific religion and accepts the principles of this religion unquestioningly. Hence there is no clear-cut definition of mysticism,[6] just as there is no clear-cut definition of religion. Generally speaking, mysticism can be regarded as a sort of religion that emphasizes the direct consciousness and intimate experience of divine presence. Such is the brief definition[7] formulated by Thomas Aquinas (1225–74), the Christian theologian and philosopher. Mysticism, says Aquinas, is *cognitio dei experimentalis,* knowledge of God obtained through living experience. Aquinas interprets the words of the Psalmist, "Oh taste and see that the Lord is good" (Ps. 34:9), as meaning a direct and immediate contact. The word "taste" conveys a personal experience that must

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be perceived with the senses. Whatever is grasped by the intellect can be communicated to another person if he too uses his intellect to decode the message. Taste, on the other hand, is uncommunicable by words. To get the sense of what something tastes like, you have to taste it yourself. Similarly, the mystic, who seeks to establish a direct contact with the Primary Source, cannot rely upon intermediaries. As Gershom Scholem observed, one of the first teachers of Hasidism intuitively used the same imagery of eating in reference to the mystical experience. This is what he said:

> *Nistar* is the name given to a matter which one cannot transmit to another person; just as the taste of [a particular] food cannot be described to a person who has ever tasted this taste, [so] is it impossible to explain in words how it is and what it is; such a thing is called *seter* [hidden]. Thus is the love and fear of God, blessed be He—it is impossible to explain to another person the love [of God] in one's heart; [therefore], it is called *nistar*.[8]

That is to say, some things must be felt directly. This is what the ancients must have meant when they pointed out the difference between the poet and the person who knows the rules of poetry. What comes from inside you is not the same as what is imposed on you from the outside, even if you believe that you know it very well. The difference between the two is profoundly significant. The Kabbalist Rabbi Moses Cordovero explained the relationship between the philosopher and the Kabbalist along the same lines. The Kabbalist is comparable to a man who is carrying a sack on his shoulder and is well aware of its contents. The philosopher observes the sack from the outside and attempts to make inferences about its contents on the basis of various external data (*Eilimah* 6c–d).

Let us now turn to another "definition." Rabbi Levi Isaac of Berdichev writes:

> There are those who sense God with their human intellect and others whose gaze is fixed on Nothing. . . . He who is granted this supreme experience loses the reality of his intellect, but when he returns from such contemplation to the intellect, he finds it full of divine and inflowing splendor.[9]

It should be noted that the act of contemplation suggested in the above excerpt presupposes a certain distance between the viewer and the

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object, regardless of the emphasis it places on experiencing the presence of this object. Nevertheless, this goes beyond rational knowledge, which presupposes that the viewer and the object are absolutely far apart. Aristotle, who defined God as "pure thought thinking itself," deeply influenced the way of thinking of many philosophers. In his opinion, cognition is man's greatest perfection and bliss. Indeed, according to the Aristotelian philosophers, cognition reaches its peak in the fusion of consciousness with God. The Neoplatonic philosophers, however, placed emphasis on the fusion of the soul with the Divine. Both the Aristotelian and Neoplatonic formulations of God refer to a supernal being in its absolute purity. In contrast, in Judaism, God is "alive," a living God, and maintains contact with the world and with man alike. In mysticism God does not generally appear as the commanding God, but in Judaism mysticism adjusts itself to the concept of the personal, commanding God. Without this element, the commandments would have no place in Judaism. Until the period of the Enlightenment, the observance of the divine commandments was supposed to go hand in hand with the great principle of "Torah from heaven."[10] Once again, each form of mysticism feeds on the conceptual framework of its own religion.

The mystics want to "lift the veil" that separates between man and God; they want to attain a more profound spiritual closeness with the divine entity, perhaps "through nourishment, rather than through knowledge," as suggested by the Kabbalist Rabbi Isaac the Blind (circa 1200) in reference to contemplation. It is important to pay attention to the positive and negative aspects of this experience. Apparently, R. Isaac wanted to emphasize that in the course of the mystical experience, the very act of contemplation produces a direct and intimate connection with the Source and the Root, almost to the point of identification. When a baby or a tree feed on Mother Earth, it becomes, as it were, an integral part of the nourishing source.[11] In any case, one can see that it is difficult to give an accurate definition of this phenomenon, which involves both the attempt to reach rational understanding and the spiritual elation[12] aroused by the extraordinary encounter.

Maimonides began his codex of the Law, *Mishneh Torah,* with a discussion of the commandment to know God. He postulates that man's observation of nature and its complexities reveals to him the wisdom and greatness of the creator, thus inducing him to love God. This love is explicitly bound up with the acquired intellectual knowledge of God

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("according to that knowledge will that love be"—*Hilkhot Teshuvah* X, 6). Obviously, this approach is meant only for the few who belong to the intellectual elite. In contrast, *Sefer Ḥasidim* (sec. 5) tells about a shepherd who used to express the stirrings of his heart in utmost sincerity, saying each day: "Master of the world, it is well known to you that if you had beasts and asked me to keep them, I would not charge you anything for keeping them for you because I love You." The shepherd expresses in a simple, yet profound, way the pure love that he feels for his Maker—the kind of love that is not provoked by any philosophical considerations. It is quite clear that both of these instances of the love of God imply some distance between man and God and convey the sense of human insignificance in the face of divine power and greatness.

The encounter between man and God gives rise to yet another kind of feelings. In his important book, *Das Heilige,* which is devoted to the concept of the Holy, Rudolph Otto dwells on three major elements: the numinous, the *mysterium tremendum,* and the *fascinorum*—namely, He who terrifies and is awe-inspiring also attracts us, so that we are fascinated by Him. Otto underscores man's ambivalence toward "the mystery which causes trembling and fascination" and toward this completely different (*das ganz andere,* the Wholly Other) reality. This ambivalence finds its expression in love and fear, cleaving (attachment to God) and recoiling (fear of excessive proximity), and standing before God, the merciful Father.

In Jewish religious literature, we find similar verbal expressions of the relationship with God. Though God is "He that dwells in the secret place of the most High," he is also "My [!] God; in Him will I trust" (Ps. 91:1-2). The prophet Isaiah (45:15) realized that "thou art a God who hidest thyself" and so did the liturgical poet Benjamin ben Rabbi Samuel in the opening of his liturgical hymn. On the basis of these verses, the poets named God "A Hidden God" (as in the popular poem by Rabbi Abraham Maimin). Precisely this nature of God stimulates in man the thirst to meet him, the yearning for the ineffable and the hidden. "My soul thirsts for thee," says the Psalmist (Ps. 63:2), and Rabbi Abraham ibn ʻEzra draws on this verse in his well-known poem, "My Soul Thirsts for Thee." In "Anʻeim zemirot ve-shirim eʻerog" [I Shall Sing Joyful Songs], one of the most famous poems of the *Yiḥud,* the "Unification" of God, which was composed by the Ashkenazi Hasidim, the phrasing, "my soul pants after thee," is found in the opening and concluding verses.[13] In

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the sixteenth century, R. Eleazar Azikri borrowed the first part of the same verse ("As the hart pants after the water brooks," Ps. 42:2) and sang: "Bosom Friend, merciful Father, thy servant shall run like a hart." This poem was introduced into the circle of spiritualists who gathered together to sing "Songs of Friendship and Love [of God]"—they were like amorous lovers whose soul yearned for their bride, the object of their passion: God.

A presumably authentic historical evidence reinforces this point: "It was told about a woman of valor that her two beloved and pleasant sons were slaughtered in her presence by some heartless gentiles in 1492, which was 'a time of trouble unto Jacob' [i.e., the expulsion from Spain]." She was brave enough to say: "Oh Lord, my God, I have always loved you. True, as long as my beloved and pleasant offspring inhabited the earth, I did not love you totally, with all my heart, because I also found room in my heart for the love of my sons. But now that my sons are gone I transformed all my heart into a dwelling place for your love. Now I can fulfill the scriptural verse: 'Thou shalt love the Lord Your God with all your heart and all your soul.'"[14]

But are these yearnings sufficient to denote a mystical relationship? The deeper the sense of being close to God, and the more intense the attempt to get to know him, perhaps even in preparation for any religious practice, the nearer one gets to the mystical level. In other words, the mystical experience is not just an aspect of some "hidden wisdom," or a demonstration of love on the part of the believer; it is also spiritual elation that springs from the very encounter with the divine presence.

Thus the Kabbalah is a historical Jewish phenomenon that phenomenologically can be compared to general mysticism.[15] The essence of mysticism is a direct and intimate contact between the two poles: man and God. The mystic strives to get a direct sense of the divine presence. This involves not only some sort of rational knowledge, but also a psychospiritual experience.

One might add that from a psychological point of view, the mystic's aspiration to establish a direct contact with the source of his physical and spiritual life must provide him with a sense of security and makes him recognize the value and purpose of his life. Even if the intermediate stages of mystical transcendence are accompanied by deep psychological wrestling, the very groping for a clear destination can relieve the tension. The words of the Psalmist: "Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is

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none upon earth that I desire beside thee" (Ps. 73:25), must be interpreted, in this light, as a recognition of the redeeming exclusivity of God that inspires boundless tranquility. Let us now recapitulate the discussion of the term 'mysticism' and its importance for the Kabbalah.

The word mysticism originates in the Greek word *muein,* which means "to close one's eyes." From this derives the word *mysterion,* which refers to the cult of mysteries. The closure suggested by this word finds its expression in two ways:

1. Closure of the mouth. The subject matter of mystical speculation is esoteric (which means in Greek: internal, namely what can be expressed in words, but cannot be disclosed in public). For this reason, the closure is in the social sense.[16] Since the mystics deal with unusual phenomena, which they do not wish to communicate indiscriminately, because not everyone is capable of truly understanding them, they discuss these things in secret, among exclusive circles, or *mysteries.* The parallel Jewish term is *sod* (secret). *Sod,* however, has two meanings: (a) Information one wishes to hide from most people for various utilitarian considerations. (b) Information that by its very nature is uncommunicable. This concerns first and foremost the concept of God. What does the Bible say about God himself? Hardly anything. Whatever we are told about God, beginning with the first verse of Genesis, refers to his relations with others: with the world, with the people of Israel, with certain individuals. As a matter of fact, human beings can say nothing about the divine sphere, because it is not part of human experience or human language. The body of knowledge we possess derives from experience and inquiry. The science of physics, for instance, conducts experiments on existing phenomena and attempts to establish the laws that govern the totality of these phenomena and their parallels. Yet it is not possible for us to form an adequate laboratory where God can be explored. There is no entity that is analogous to him: "To whom then will you liken me, that I should be his equal, says the Holy one" (Isa. 40:25). God is beyond our grasp and any statement about him is necessarily lacking. Nor are there any proper language tools that can capture this exceptional divine being. Though the Psalmist enthusiastically defines the superiority of man by saying "yet thou hast made him a little lower than the divine" (Ps. 8:6), the gap is not merely quantitative but actually absolute. From the point of view

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of God, it is not at all possible to bridge this gap: "Hitherto shalt thou come, but no further" (Job 38:11). From the point of view of man, the desire to know the Ineffable is unquenchable. As already mentioned, man is fascinated by and attracted to the hidden God whom he wishes to know. The experience of spiritual elation or the contemplation of a realm that by definition is uncommunicable, transcendental, finds its expression, for instance, in the words of the *Zohar:*[17] "'And the perceivers *[maskilim]* shall shine' (Dan. 12:3)—who are the perceivers? It is the wise man who, of himself, looks upon things that cannot be expressed orally." This tension is the foundation of mystical life.

2. Closure of the senses to this world and opening up the soul to spiritual matters and to the supernal world. Man's entire world is oriented toward the world on high. From this follow two characteristic features: (a) Withdrawal from this world, to the extent of asceticism. A case in point is Baḥya ibn Pakuda (eleventh century), who under the influence of the Moslem mystics, the Sufis, postulated the cultivation of asceticism as a necessary preparation for the love of God. But he was against extreme forms of asceticism, and the same holds true of the Kabbalists. In ancient Greece, however, the mysteries of the Dionysian cult required complete withdrawal from this world. (b) Since the mystic closes himself to the materialism of this world, he opens up his soul in one single direction: toward the divine object. Hence the sense of unity, or unification, that strikes him and occasionally brings him to the state of *unio mystica.* The Moslem philosopher Abunaṣer Alfarabi entertained the possibility of the union of the human intellect with the active intellect, though at the end of his life he dismissed this notion as one of the vanities of old age. This image of vanities of old age was widespread in medieval Jewish literature, as for instance in the works of Isaac ibn Latif of the thirteenth century. But in *Maḥberet ha-Tofet* Immanuel of Rome was highly critical of this image. The Sufi Galal al Din Romi (thirteenth century) describes the man who attains the mystical state of self-obliteration by using an interesting image: "The essence of his being continues to exist but his qualities blend with those of God, just as the candle flame exists in the presence of the sun—for if you insert a piece of cotton in it, it will burn. Yet the flame does not exist because it does not give you light. The light of the sun has overshadowed it."[18] Indeed, Kabbalah concerns communion with God, but not total merging with him. It is rather a

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communion of thought, of the will. Of itself, the identification with the divine will does not entail identification with the divine immanence. Even when Kabbalah discusses the obligation to erase corporeality and annihilate the self, so that the *ani* (ego) is transformed into *ayin* (naught), it does not mean total fusion with the divine being. Nonetheless, several kabbalistic formulations explicitly convey such total identification.

The notion of unity with God gave rise to the widespread tendency in various mystical traditions to use erotic symbolism.[19] God is depicted as a desirable female and the attachment to him is presented in terms of male-female sexual relations. This accounts for the introduction of love poems into some kabbalistic circles.

From the foregoing exposition it emerges that the mystic cannot easily communicate to his fellow men either his experiences or the thoughts resulting from his awareness and speculative study. Yet, paradoxically, the mystic feels the urge to tell of his "findings" and of his experiences. In fact, many of the non-Jewish mystics presented such revelations in their autobiographies, which stand out as literary gems. Jewish mysticism treats the transmission of mystical contents in a dialectical manner. The obligation of knowledge (as Rabbi 'Azriel says: "Whoever does not know Him, cannot worship Him") goes hand in hand with the obligation of maintaining nonknowledge, or concealing. In the words of *Sefer Yeṣirah,* "Restrain your mouth from speaking, and your heart from thinking, and if your heart runs let it return to its place."[20]

When speaking of consciousness and knowledge in relation to mysticism, we must bear in mind that they are not restricted to the functioning of the cognitive faculties. Generally speaking, the human sources of knowledge are the senses and the intellect. The intellect processes the data perceived by the senses. The mystic believes that there are other sources of knowledge, which manifest themselves mainly through the soul. Perceived as "a sparkle of the divine source,"[21] the soul is inextricably connected to its source. This leads to an important conclusion: the intellect, being a physical entity, is limited in terms of its physical existence and its spiritual accomplishments alike; the soul, being of a divine essence, is eternal, independent of the reality of the body, and has access to reliable sources of knowledge. Since a direct contact with the divine cannot take place in the world of nature, the arena of the encounter between man and God is the human soul.

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THE WORLD OF SYMBOLS

Because the hidden and transcendental divine reality is not perceived by our senses or known to our intellect, as they are far too inadequate for this purpose, but rather is perceived by the soul, an important question arises: In what language does the soul express itself? In other words, what is the nature of the discourse between the souls? The answer to this question was well expressed by a Taoist: "The rabbit chase owes its existence to the rabbit. Once you catch the rabbit, you can forget about the chase. Similarly, words owe their existence to their meaning. Once you grasp the meaning, you can forget about the words. Now where can I find a man who has already forgotten the words so that I can exchange a word with him?"[22]

The mystic does not want to dispense with words, but rather wants to improve upon them by expanding their meaning. The additional meanings he is looking for, which are somehow inherent in the ordinary sense of the words, are supposed to intimate divine truths that cannot be captured and conveyed by the ordinary, simplistic language, which relates to a lower layer of reality. For this purpose, the Kabbalist uses several methods of word manipulation. The most common ones are *gimatria, notrikon,* and *temurah.* In *gimatria,* every letter of the alphabet and their combinations have numerical value, and a word or a phrase can be replaced by another one of the same numerical value. *Notrikon* treats a word as an acronym concealing a meaningful statement within itself. *Temurah* means permutation: each letter can be exchanged with another one according to a certain code, such as Aleph = Tav; Bet = Shin; and so forth.[23]

The use of *gimatria* was a common practice among the Hasidim of Ashkenaz. In order to caution against the misuse of *gimatria,* one of the Kabbalists of the sixteenth century wrote the following: "They based their kabbalistic knowledge on *gimatria* so that the latter will serve as proof and evidence of the kabbalistic knowledge they possessed, because Kabbalah is the essence and *gimatria* is but the aftercourse of wisdom."[24] The method of letter combinations was adopted mainly by Barukh Togarmi, by his eminent disciple Abraham Abulafia, and by the members of their circle.[25] Other similar methods consist of combinations of words and *gimatriyot* that evoke additional meanings and statements.

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Another method of expanding the meaning of words is the symbolic one (to be distinguished from the allegorical one, used by the philosophers, which was not acceptable to the Kabbalists),[26] which views every being as a reflection of a higher reality. In the symbolic approach, words and objects are matched to each other in order to express to the fullest what cannot be captured by ordinary words. The symbols function as codes through which one is supposed to grasp what lies behind the symbol. Indeed, the philosophers coined terms, while the mystics and the Kabbalists created symbols.

When the word is used as a symbol,[27] it assumes a higher value, because it is loaded with multiple meanings. In itself, the word delimits meaning; as a symbol, it opens up diverse possibilities. For instance, a piece of red cloth has one meaning in Spain, another in Russia, and still another when it sticks out in the back of a truck in Israel or in the United States. Symbols can also be paradoxical. For instance, one may say about God that he is *ayin* (naught), which actually means that he is beyond apprehension, or that his being is distinguishable and separable from any physical entity known to us. As one of the Kabbalists says: "This *ayin* is more substantive than all the substances in the world."[28] This brings to mind the sun in its moments of full intensity, when its light is so powerful that if we look at the sun, we see nothing at all. In short,

1. The symbol is an approximation—it is as close as we can get to convey the meaning of that which in itself is indescribable.

2. The symbol is a remote echo of some essence that is unapprehensible and uncommunicable, partly because of the inadequacy of human perception. As one Kabbalist of North Africa said in the seventeenth century: "And you, son, take in the essence of things, not their material aspects. For matter is but an analogy to the spirit. Having been created of matter, we have no recourse to comprehend the divine, the spiritual, except by means of a metaphor."[29]

3. Hence the abundant, and sometimes contradictory, use of symbols, and the benefit derived from it: "Even when profound matters are communicated in public, only those who are meant to understand them, will do so."[30]

4. The symbols themselves were revealed, so to speak, by God himself through his Torah and his creation.

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5. The symbol serves not only a vehicle of expression but also as a means of exerting influence on the supernal world.

In using symbolic language, every word assumes a deeper, and therefore a more truthful, meaning. Words are used not in their literal sense, but as a symbol of something else. For example, the metaphor of corporeality as the garb of the human soul suggests that what is exterior is transient, while what is interior and hidden is the real thing. In fact, this is one of the basic ideas of Kabbalah and mysticism in general, for the reality of this world is but a reflection of the divine, supernal reality, which is the true reality.

Since in essence the mystical symbol seeks to express that which is beyond words, the symbol itself does not exhaust meaning. Therefore the mystics and the Kabbalists use a wide range of symbols to express a single idea. Naturally, familiarity with this symbolic system is indispensable for encoding and decoding kabbalistic texts.

From whence does the Kabbalist draw his symbols? First and foremost, from the Scriptures, but also from the rabbinic tradition, the world at large, and human reality. Man, who was created "in the image of God,"[31] the structure of the universe, and human history consist of an array of facts that symbolize higher values. The kabbalistic quest makes reality as whole transparent and uncovers, stage by stage, its various layers, until it reaches the very root of the universe: divine unity. This outlook allows the Kabbalist to use an anthropomorphic form of expression. As Gershom Scholem says: "The Kabbalists were not deterred from using bold language that referred to very subtle matters in extremely corporeal terms."[32] Nonetheless, the Kabbalist warns against simplistic interpretation or understanding. For instance, the *Idra,* the part of the *Zohar* that displays the strongest tendency to speak of divine matters in corporeal terms, opens with a warning based on the verse: "Cursed be the man that makes any carved or molten idol" (Deut. 27:15). Rabbi Meir ben Simeon of Narbonne (thirteenth century), who attacked the Kabbalists, adopted such a simplistic approach. By dwelling on the literal meaning of the kabbalistic text, he inferred that it was heretical and unacceptable to the faithful of Israel. The truth of the matter is that the Kabbalist took the license to express his ideas in the most extreme fashion.[33]

The symbolistic approach is what brings the Kabbalists together, for

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the Kabbalah is not a speculative-philosophical system in the full sense of the word. It deals with various subjects related to divine life, the world, man, and religion, but not necessarily as a coherent system. It has a wide range of views and contains conflicting ideas even about basic matters. Yet there is a common denominator that unites all Kabbalists and it is manifest particularly in their basic attitude toward the symbol. True, contemporary science distinguishes between various types of symbols in terms of their meanings and their relationship to the thing symbolized, such as the descriptive symbol, the creative symbol, and so on. However, the approach that lies at the center of Kabbalah and that most characterizes kabbalistic thinking is that things are transparent and lend themselves to profound investigation that uncovers their inner layers. The symbol is not merely a vehicle of expression that addresses an elusive reality that cannot be adequately conveyed by human language—such as the divine realm, which is essentially different from human experience. Rather, the symbol is an instrument of profound knowledge. It captures the whole world—the physical world and the spiritual one, the physical reality and the spiritual Torah—and uses it as a basis for widening human horizons and deepening the scope of man's understanding.

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