

ELLIOT R. WOLFSON



Venturing Beyond
Law & Morality in Kabbalistic Mysticism

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For Barbara
Beyond Venturing

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To live outside the law
you must be honest.
(Bob Dylan)

Introduction

Morality and Mysticism: Parallel or Intersecting Lines?

Anarchism is a visionary politics.
Mysticism is the anarchism of religion.
Mystics don't rely on structure.

(William Everson)

Before the correlation of mysticism and morality can be assessed properly, the meaning of each term must be addressed independently. I begin with a methodological disclaimer: as thinkers from various disciplines in social, cultural, and natural sciences have concurred, it is not humanly possible to inspect a universe of discourse circumspectly, for there is no Archimedean fulcrum point outside that universe, no transcendental position whence one would be capable of surveying the field in its totality; indeed, the hermeneutic quest—conspicuously circular—presupposes that the investigator be embedded in the field yet to be investigated. Needless to say, it is not genuinely possible to speak of ‘a field in its totality’, as the nature of the field (both natural and semiotic) is such that its boundaries are forever subject to reinscription and realignment. Thus, lacking both a transcendental standpoint and a conviction regarding the possibility of demarcating borders, it seems prudent to lay aside taxonomic aspirations.

It remains incumbent on me nonetheless to offer some working understanding of both mysticism and morality. To begin with mysticism, as is well known by scholars of religion, the problem of delineating the precise meaning of this term is intricately complex.¹ Indeed, at this stage of scholarly research, it seems fair to say that all attempts to provide a definition both sufficiently general and necessarily particular will prove unsatisfactory. In principle, I may assent to the contextualist position that the precise import of the term

¹ For a recent discussion on some of the problems of setting a definition of mysticism, see King, *Orientalism*, 7–34.

‘mysticism’ (as any phenomenon) will have to be determined by the specific setting in which it arises, a setting that is understood by consideration of a plethora of historical factors rather than of an ideal essence. There is a crack in the logic of the argument, however, for if one is to make a case for context, one must be out of context, as one who is not out of context cannot ascertain the context in which one is situated contextually. With respect to the issue at hand, I may subscribe to the view that there is no mysticism in the abstract, but only historical instantiations of the mystical,² but I cannot assume even this unless I have already determined some meaning to be ascribed to the term ‘mysticism’.

‘Morality’ provides little relief from these quandaries. Philosophers have long sought to comprehend the meaning of this term by probing for underlying beliefs thought to regulate actions considered acceptable or desirable within specific interhuman environments. It is not, and has never been, entirely clear what criteria are necessary to establish a foundation for an ethical system. Indeed, the relativist orientation, which, seemingly, has been expressed in Western thought from its genealogical inception, has been enhanced in recent decades by postmodern suspicion regarding claims to ultimate knowledge or essential truth, and the consequent emphasis on disjunction, fragmentation, diversity, and difference. One might be persuaded that ‘a weak ontology, or better an ontology of the weakening of Being, supplies philosophical reasons for preferring a liberal, tolerant, and democratic society rather than an authoritarian and totalitarian one’.³ But the fact is that the weakening of ontology potentially destabilizes foundationalism of any sort, including the foundation of a disintegrating ontology that would facilitate tolerance and democracy.

In setting the table for the ensuing discussion, I will not attempt a comprehensive definition of either mysticism or morality. On the contrary, I will accept some general assumptions concerning the denotation of these terms, but only as they apply—and my claims should be so judged—to the kabbalistic material that I will be examining closely in the subsequent chapters of this book. I assume that ‘mysticism’, as it pertains to the history of kabbalah, relates primarily to the contemplative envisioning of the invisible deity in the imagination of the visionary. In the imaginal space of this visualization, light, letter, and image converge, as the object of specularization, the ten luminous emanations (*sefirot*), are comprised in the four letters of the name YHWH, the inner essence of Torah, which is configured in the shape of an anthropos. This is not the place to offer a suitable account of this core experience in its

² Perhaps, in the effort to avoid reification of the phenomenon, it would be most prudent to substitute the nominative ‘mysticism’ for the adjectival ‘mystical’. That is, at best we can discern and deliberate about mystical trends within religious contexts but not about mysticism as such.

³ Vattimo, *Nihilism*, 19.

complexity, what may be referred to cogently as the ‘experience of the non-experientiable reality’ manifest in the ‘tetragrammatic depth’ of the mystery of the ineffable.⁴ In other publications I have explored the imaginal contours of this experience in detail,⁵ and, in the course of this book I will have ample opportunity to reconsider some of the relevant themes from the new perspectives occasioned by the singular focus of this inquiry.

With respect to the term ‘morality’, I assume that it relates to directives, interdictions, and sanctions that inform behavioural patterns of persons who forge bonds and solidarities within discrete communities linked to larger socio-political constellations. From a sociological perspective, I suppose, we could say that moral codes are rules that foster some semblance of social order, a tendency that has even been traced to a primal impulse amongst hominids for solidarity,⁶ but the ethical nature of these representations relates to an intentionality that may well exceed neuroanatomy and the biological legacy of ape ancestry, an intentionality that (as perhaps Emmanuel Levinas more than any other philosopher of our time has insisted) entails acting on the basis of an infinite responsibility that one bears in the face of the other, the face transcendent to my own that calls forth an incalculable response, the interruptive and hence unpredictable saying, on the part of the self vis-à-vis the other.⁷ Needless to say, to the extent to which the notion of the ‘other’ is more encompassing, so the moral rectitude of self-identity, and the self-interest invariably entwined with it, will be expanded. I bracket the question of the ground for that assertion, for to speak of ground here would be ill-founded.

One might suppose that mysticism and morality are not only compatible, but that they are two paths leading to the same terminus.⁸ The convergence of

⁴ I have borrowed these expressions from Morrissey, *Consciousness*, 117–18. Voegelin’s ‘philosophical mysticism’, to the best of my knowledge, is not dependent on kabbalistic theosophy, but his ideas, and especially the expressions that I have cited, are strikingly appropriate to describe kabbalah.

⁵ The fullest treatment is to be found in Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*, but I have returned to a depiction of this core experience in many other writings. See e.g. ‘Forms of Visionary Ascent’, ‘Iconicity of the Text’, and *Language, Eros, Being*.

⁶ See Turner, *On the Origins*, 45–59.

⁷ There have been numerous studies dedicated to the ethical philosophy promulgated by Levinas, and here I offer a modest delineation of relevant examples: Manning, *Interpreting Otherwise*; Waldenfels, ‘Response’; Peperzak, *Beyond*; Cohen, *Ethics*, 145–60. For additional references, see Ch. 1, nn. 4 and 6.

⁸ Such a position is articulated by Heard, *Mystical and Ethical Experience*. Heard distinguishes between the mystical and ethical on the grounds that the former entails the all-consuming love of God occasioned by an encounter of immediacy, whereas the latter entails the duties that one has in relation to other human beings and to the world more generally. The task nevertheless is to harness together these two opposing tendencies such that the mystical becomes the foundation for the ethical and the ethical a foundation for the mystical. See also Inge, *Mysticism*, 71–2, 165; Ellwood, *Mysticism*, 146–70, esp. 164–6.

the paths at the end could be explained by a shared goal to live a just and righteous life, which is at the same time a life of devotion and piety. The point has been expressed, for example, in monotheistic traditions wherein God has been characterized (under the weight of Platonic metaphysics) as the ideal of supreme goodness as well as the source of all being, whence it follows that love of God would encompass love of all creation and the love of all humankind.⁹ The isometry between love of God and love of humanity in the history of contemplative spirituality in Eastern and Western branches of Christianity is evidently indebted to the ‘great commandment pericope’ attributed to Jesus (Matt. 22: 36–40; Luke 10: 27; Mark 12: 29–33)¹⁰ which locates the essence of Torah in the combination of the commandment to love one’s neighbour as oneself (Lev. 19: 18) and the commandment to love God with all one’s heart, soul, and might (Deut. 6: 5).¹¹ As Franz Rosenzweig rightly noted, the confluence of these two commands is a genuine point of meeting for Jews and Christians, since the two liturgical communities acknowledge that love of neighbour, which is the ‘embodiment of all commandments’, can be realized only in the total surrender required by the command to love God.¹² Echoing the same sentiment, Levinas wrote:

The love of God in the love of one’s neighbor. This original ethical signifying of the face would thus signify—without any metaphor or figure of speech, in its rigorously proper meaning—the transcendence of a God not objectified in the face in which he speaks; a God who does not ‘take on body,’ but who approaches precisely through this relay to the neighbor-binding men among one another with obligation, each one answering for the lives of all the others.¹³

The attuned ear will discern in the above passage a tacit polemical jab against the Christian doctrine of incarnation: the transcendent God does not take on a body, but he is manifest in the face of the other in relation to whom I bear an infinite ethical obligation.¹⁴ It is in this sense that we can speak of the love of

⁹ See discussion of this seminal issue in Buber, *Eclipse*, 55–8. King, *Orientalism*, 7, argues that the notions of God, the soul, and communion as the loving relationship between the two bespeaks a decidedly Christological orientation in the study of mysticism.

¹⁰ What may be called a midrashic gloss on the dictum attributed to Jesus appears in 1 John 4: 20–1. See Nissen, ‘Distinctive Character’; Lambrecht, SJ, ‘Great Commandment’; Ruzer, ‘Double Love’.

¹¹ On the reverberation of the teaching attributed to Jesus in Christian mystical texts, see McGinn, *Foundations*, 246; Hollenback, *Mysticism*, 574.

¹² Rosenzweig, *Star*, 221, 230. The confluence of the directives to love God and to love humanity was affirmed in a slightly different idiom by Cohen, *Religion*, 161: ‘The love of God, which corresponds to God’s love, must have its basis in social love for the fellowman.’

¹³ Levinas, *In the Time*, 171.

¹⁴ The implicit critique of the incarnational underpinning of the confluence of the love of God and the love of neighbour in the history of Church doctrine is not taken into account by Peperzak, ‘Significance’, 189–93.

God coinciding with the love of one's neighbour. A similar phenomenon is attested in kabbalistic sources, although, as we shall see in the succeeding chapter, a question remains about the precise connotation of the key terms that one may have uncritically assumed refer to humanity without qualification. Needless to say, a more constricted view on what it is to be 'human' will narrow the scope of the application of the second commandment.¹⁵

An eloquent formulation of the insight that the love of God comprehends the love of all things is offered by Abraham Isaac Kook, the twentieth-century

¹⁵ That the convergence of the love of God and the love of humanity is exemplified in Hasidic teaching is the thesis proffered by Buber, *Hasidism*, 159–83. A similar orientation is adopted by Jacobs, 'Relationship'. It lies beyond the scope of this study to evaluate this claim for the history of Judaism in general, but the observation of Jacobs (pp. 55–6) that this idea is emphasized especially by Jewish mystics (he cites a passage from Horowitz's *Shenei Luhot ha-Berit* in support of this claim) is questionable. The issue is how one interprets the key words such as 'man' or 'neighbour'. If it can be shown (as I set out to do in Chapter 1) that the semantic implication of the key terms is limited to the Jewish people, then the presumed universalism must be reinterpreted as a veiled ethnocentrism. In the specific case of Horowitz, Jacobs misinterprets the explicit reference to the love of man leading to the love of God as an attestation of a universalistic ethics. In fact, as I will argue in Chapter 1, Horowitz is following a long-standing kabbalistic tradition by focusing exclusively on the love of the Jewish people, which encompasses love of God. For an equally misleading representation of the kabbalistic anthropology, see Jacobs, *Religion*, 5. Without any qualification whatsoever the author writes: 'In the Kabbalah, every human soul is a spark of Adam's soul, bound to engage in the task of restoration of the holy sparks that fell into the demonic realm when Adam sinned.' Jacobs is obviously utilizing the central theme of the sixteenth-century Lurianic kabbalah to depict the kabbalah more generally. Apart from this questionable move, in the Lurianic texts that I have studied it is exclusively the soul of every Jew that is related to the soul of Adam. See *ibid.* 13, where Jacobs again cites Isaiah Horowitz as if he were speaking about humanity in general when in point of fact he is only describing the ontic and existential situation of the Jew. On 47–58 there is a sustained discussion of the nature of the soul in relation to God in kabbalistic sources. Only on 50 does the author assert that in most of these texts the divine status of the soul is reserved for Israel, which mirrors the heavenly pattern on earth. The rest of the discussion leaves the reader with the impression that the account of the soul elicited from kabbalistic sources applies indiscriminately to all members of the human species. A similar criticism may be levelled against the presentation of the material in Jacobs, 'Doctrine', 87–114. Only when discussing the respective views of Shabbetai Sheftel Horowitz and Shneur Zalman of Liady does Jacobs intimate that the description of the divine nature of the human soul applies exclusively to the Jew (pp. 99–104). Shneur Zalman's position, which, as far as I can tell, has been reaffirmed by every other master in the Lubavitch dynasty, is that there is a qualitative difference between the soul of the Jew and the soul of all other ethnicities: the latter possess an animal soul (*nefesh ha-behemit*), which derives from the aspect of the shell of the other side and is located in the left chamber of the heart, whereas the former alone is endowed with the divine soul (*nefesh ha-elohit*), which is the spark that emanates from the light of the Infinite and is located in the brain as well as in the right chamber of the heart. On this aspect of Habad Hasidism, see Lowenthal, *Communicating the Infinite*, 54; Elior, *Paradoxical Ascent*, 115–24. The ethnocentric orientation was affirmed as well in the teaching of the seventh Lubavitch rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneersohn, but one can detect a shift in his later years, which is reflected especially in the campaign to encourage Gentiles to abide by the seven Noahide laws. See Ravitzky, *Messianism*, 188–93; Ehrlich, *Messiah of Brooklyn*, 107–8.

Jewish thinker/poet whose religious philosophy espoused a mystical presentation of Zionist ideology: 'One cannot but love God, and this sweet and necessary love must engender as a practical consequence an active love for everything in which we perceive the light of God. . . . And it is impossible not to be filled with love for every creature, for the flow of the light of God shines in everything, and everything discloses the pleasantness of God.'¹⁶ It would seem from this mystical enthusiasm that intimate experience of communion with God would ideally promote the welfare of human society at large as well as the ecological well-being of the universe. Basic to the mystical insight, according to this line of interpretation, is the assumption that the human being is concomitantly *imago dei* and *imago mundi*.¹⁷ Alternatively expressed, in the enlightened state there is a unity of three elements—God, human, and world—in their ontic difference, for God is in consciousness as other than world, and consciousness is in world as other than God. Mysticism, on this score, may provide a paradigm for *monadic fulfilment* realized in the chasm that binds the same and other in mutual juxtaposition.¹⁸

An illustration of this convergence can be sought in expressions of altruism anchored in the ideal of self-abnegation, extermination, extinction of ego-consciousness associated with mystical union. Conjunction with God, as mystical yearning attests, occasions annihilation of self, asserting one's nothingness, a kenotic effacement that may bring about equanimity of mind and detachment of spirit, which, in turn, occasion concern for the other. From this perspective, then, it is not only that there is no discrepancy between mysticism and morality, but the former could be viewed as the ultimate ground (in an empirical and not merely logical sense) of the latter insofar as the principle of ethical action is rooted in the boundless love that overflows in the mystic who has emptied the ego in realizing the insubstantiality of the phenomenal self, thereby affirming the privation of being as the fullness of not-being. As William Stace put it:

The basis of the mystical theory of ethics is that the separateness of individual selves produces that egoism which is the source of conflict, grasping, aggressiveness, selfishness, hatred, cruelty, malice, and other forms of evil; and that this separateness is abolished in the mystical consciousness in which all distinctions are annulled. . . . The natural emotional counterpart of the mystical awareness that there is, in that reality which the mystic believes himself to perceive, no separateness of I from you, or of you

¹⁶ Kook, *Abraham Isaac Kook*, 135. See Yaron, *Philosophy of Rav Kook*, 174–5; Ish-Shalom, *Rav Avraham Itzhak HaCohen Kook*, 141–2, 203–4; Fine, 'Rav Kook', 35–6.

¹⁷ The terminology is that of the fifteenth-century Neoplatonist, Nicholas of Cusa. See Zaehner, *Mysticism*, 103.

¹⁸ Cf. the discussion in Angel, *Enlightenment*, 39–105.

from he, and that we are all one in the Universal Self—the emotional counterpart of this is love. And love, according to the theory, is the sole basis, and also the sole command, of morality.¹⁹

Many examples from literature classified under the rubric of mysticism could be cited to illustrate the point that extinction of the individual will in the unconditional obedience to the divine will has been thought of as an ethical gesticulation. In monotheistic traditions, mystical piety has been expressed accordingly in terms of humility, which is portrayed as self-annihilation.²⁰

Conversely, it has been argued that mysticism is at odds with, or at the very least supersedes, the normative limits imposed by the moral sensibility.²¹ That is, an ethical ideology, whatever the specific nature of the codes of behaviour it mandates and promulgates, must be predicated on some form of axiological dualism, a distinction between right and wrong; even if the positive content of these categories cannot be determined absolutely and unambiguously, from a logical standpoint it is accurate to say that moral judgement of any sort necessarily presumes the recognition of a disparity between good and evil and a consequent sense of obligation to pursue what is just and to avoid what is unjust. If, however, mystical experience truly embraces a form of non-dual consciousness, as a number of scholars have surmised, then in such a state of mind, or mindlessness as the case may be, the regulative dichotomy so basic to ethical discretion would seemingly be transcended and the very foundation for ethical decisions undermined. Ethical relativism, therefore, would not be seen as a challenge to, but rather as an affirmation of, absolute truth. As Heraclitus supposedly expressed the matter: ‘For god all things are fair and good and just, but men have taken some things as unjust, others as just.’²² The erasure of the difference that the moral standpoint presupposes is precisely what the coincidence of opposites experienced in mystical union seems to yield. The logical consequence of the paradoxical collapse of polarity

¹⁹ Stace, *Mysticism*, 324. On the convergence of the mystical and moral, see id., *Teachings*, 26.

²⁰ See Hollenback, *Mysticism*, 271, 573–5.

²¹ An insightful examination of the ostensible conflict and potential synthesis of the mystical and ethical dimensions of religious experience is found in Tillich, *Mysticism*. Although Tillich’s analysis focuses on one nineteenth-century German thinker, the issues he raises are broader and are still relevant in contemporary discussions on this topic. However, one of the unfortunate consequences of the typology employed by Tillich in his exposition of Schelling is the portrayal of Judaism as the manifestation of an ‘absolutely anti-mystical principle’—which is linked to its supposedly unqualified rejection of the identity of God and nature—that leads to the embrace of ‘ethnicizing forms of worship’ joined to an ‘absolutely anti-ethnic consciousness of election’. Judaism is thus guilty (!) of an ‘ethical monotheism’ that is as one-sided as the ‘pagan principle of union’ (pp. 122–4).

²² Kahn, *Art and Thought*, 183.

is offered in the following account of salvific gnosis in the *Gospel of Philip*, in terms that are remarkably relevant to understanding the symbolic of medieval kabbalah and its aftermath: 'Light and darkness, life and death, right and left, are brothers of one another. They are inseparable. Because of this neither are the good good nor the evil evil, nor is life life, nor death death. For this reason each one will dissolve into its earliest origin. But those who are exalted above the world are indissoluble, eternal.'²³

The ostensible antinomies are not only inseparable; they are indistinguishable in their source whence they emerge as 'brothers of one another'. One may, indeed must, begin by discriminating light and dark, life and death, right and left, but in the end, when one is enlightened, there is neither light nor dark, neither life nor death, neither right nor left, as opposites disintegrate into the non-differentiated unity of their origin. If we are to uphold this as the contemplative ideal, then mysticism seemingly would preclude morality, as the unitive consciousness attained by the mystic is a form of abstraction that not only collapses binaries that appear to be essential for moral discernment, but also dissolves the concrete separateness of persons, which alone guarantees the alterity of the other and thereby imposes moral claims on the social (or, following Levinas, we may speak of the interfacial) character of self.²⁴ Just as the One to whom the mystic is conjoined is the being in whom opposites coincide and thus there is no basis to differentiate right and wrong, so the self that is absorbed in this indifference is itself (and here language has surpassed its limit as, technically speaking, there is no longer a self to be itself) located beyond good and evil and, consequently, stands outside the purview of moral concern.²⁵ The matter is formulated simply and lucidly in a dictum attributed to the Dhyana Master Chien in one of the more important collections of Zen teachings: 'In enlightenment there is neither purity nor impurity. . . . Mind does not know dharmas. Though you say that dharmas bind the ego, the substance of all dharmas has neither bondage nor liberation.'²⁶ The point is reiterated in an eighth-century Tibetan Buddhist text, *Rig-pa ngo-sprod gcer-mthong rang-grol*, which presents the essentials of the teaching of Dzogchen: 'But if you understand this empty primal awareness which is your own mind, |

²³ *Gospel of Philip* 53: 14–23, tr. in *Nag Hammadi Codex II*, 2–7, 147.

²⁴ Proudfoot, 'Mysticism', 22.

²⁵ The point is raised, with specific reference to the conflict between morality and religion that emerges from the *Bhagavad Gita*, by Danto, *Mysticism*, 94–5. For a more recent discussion on the relationship of mysticism and ethics with special emphasis on Asian religions, see the exchange between Kripal and Barnard in *Crossing Boundaries*, 15–99. For a similar phenomenon in Islamic mysticism, see references in Ch. 3, n. 90, and cf. the discussion on the suspension of the ethical in Wasserstrom, *Religion After Religion*, 225–36.

²⁶ Broughton, *Bodhidharma Anthology*, 47. See Ch. 3, n. 46.

The consequences of merit and sin will never come to be realized, | Just as a spring cannot originate in the empty sky. | In the state of emptiness itself, the object of merit or of sin is not even created.²⁷

Robert C. Zaehner detected this very point when he noted that the feelings of ecstatic rapture experienced by a mystic ‘often coincide with a blunting of the moral sense or in its distortion’.²⁸ To be sure, Zaehner insists that mystical consciousness of the union of all being, to which he refers by the technical term ‘pan-en-hen-ism’ (literally, ‘all-in-one-ism’), the assimilation of all form in the formless form of the form of formlessness, discerns neither good nor evil. The effect that this (un)awareness will have on the person’s morality depends in great measure on a prior inclination—mystical union will make the decent person better and the insolent one worse. The critical point, however, is that the experience itself cannot yield any independent ethical value and hence the supposition regarding any intrinsic connection between mysticism and morality would have to be severed. Rather than being ‘a powerful motive and impulsion towards ethical, and therefore towards social, action’, mystical consciousness may in fact subvert the basic structure of worldhood necessary to legitimate moral behaviour.²⁹

The potential conflict between morality and mysticism can be expressed from another vantage-point. As the historical record clearly illustrates, the inward orientation of mystical life has often entailed an ascetic renunciation of worldly affairs. An extreme disregard of the mundane, however, can challenge an important ingredient of ethical reasoning that is linked to the intrinsic value accorded the phenomenal realm. The extent to which mystical experience fosters an aversion to the physical world and the social sphere of human interaction was well understood and poignantly expressed by Søren Kierkegaard. The mystic, he thought, is free in relation to God because he has ‘chosen himself absolutely’.³⁰ This absolute choice, choosing absolutely,

²⁷ *Self-Liberation*, 27.

²⁸ Zaehner, *Mysticism*, 103.

²⁹ Stace, *Mysticism*, 333. See also Wainwright, *Mysticism*, 225–6. On the one hand, Wainwright asserts that mysticism can affect morality adversely when ‘it makes a person indifferent to moral values and the importance of moral distinctions’. On the other hand, he acknowledges that mysticism can ‘have a positive and beneficial effect on the moral lives of those who are touched by it’, inasmuch as it strengthens ‘those attitudes and dispositions which are moral or which have moral consequences’. Wainwright raises doubt as to whether mysticism teaches any morally relevant truth that would not be available apart from mystical experience or whether any moral ideal or norm depends on mystical experience for its validity. He thus concludes that, ‘while there may be significant psychological or social connections between mysticism and morality, there are few significant logical or epistemic connections’. On the conflict between mysticism and morality, see also Connor, *Georges Bataille*, 94–153.

³⁰ Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 2: 245.

which is accomplished in complete isolation, facilitates the uncompromising and all-consuming love of God,³¹ but, as a consequence, the external world of intersubjectivity is reduced to naught; meaningful behaviour for the mystic is limited to 'inward action'.³² Kierkegaard draws the logical conclusion with respect to the relationship between the mystical and ethical: 'You will see already at this point how little the life of the mystic is ethically determined, since it is the highest expression of his repentance to repent that earlier, before he became concrete in the world, while his soul was merely abstractly defined, that is, as a child, he had not chosen God.'³³ The mystical experience breeds contempt of existence, which amounts to a disdain of the very love of God that the mystic seeks to cultivate to the exclusion of all else.³⁴ Mysticism, therefore, is a 'deceit against the world', as it leads to a renunciation of one's moral obligations to other human beings: 'Generally the mystic chooses the solitary life, but with that the situation is not clear, for the question is whether he has a right to choose it. . . . He who devotes himself one-sidedly to the mystical life becomes at last so alien to all men that every relationship, even the tenderest, the most heartfelt, becomes indifferent to him.'³⁵

The mystic's self-absorption runs the risk of disentangling the knot by which love of God and love of humanity are intricately bound. Kierkegaard does not reject the mystic/ascetic path categorically. Withdrawal from the world (a component of Christian pietism from its inception) has a positive role to play if it stems from the free choice of the person, but free choice is possible only for one who has become 'concrete' by choosing oneself ethically.³⁶ What disturbs Kierkegaard is that the mystic 'chooses himself abstractly', which means he 'constantly chooses himself out of the world' and he 'is unable to choose himself back again into the world'. The ethical demands the choice of an individual who at the very instant of choosing to escape the world chooses to return to it. 'For when I choose myself repen-

³¹ Ibid. 247: 'The whole world is a dead world for the mystic, he has fallen in love with God.'

³² Ibid. 246.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid. 248.

³⁵ Ibid. 249. Although Kierkegaard is critical of the opposition of the mystical to the ethical, he is cognizant of the inward power of the former, a power that has both a divine and demonic side. See *Fear and Trembling*, 97: 'In spite of the severity with which ethics requires revelation, it cannot be denied that secrecy and silence really make a man great precisely because they are characteristics of inwardness. . . . The tragic hero who is the favorite of ethics is the purely human, and him I can understand, and all he does is in the light of the revealed. If I go further, then I stumble upon the paradox, either the divine or the demoniac, for silence is both. Silence is the snare of the demon, and the more one keeps silent, the more terrifying the demon becomes; but silence is also the mutual understanding between the Deity and the individual.'

³⁶ *Either/Or*, 2: 252.

tantly I gather myself together in all my finite concretion, and in the fact that I have thus chosen myself out of the finite I am in the most absolute continuity with it.³⁷

In a strikingly analogous manner, Rosenzweig decried the implicit immorality that derives from the mystic's ascetic renunciation and the ensuing retreat into the silence of seclusion, an immorality that is to be distinguished from the amorality implied by his own notion of the meta-ethical nature of redeeming human love:³⁸

Man defined only as an object of divine love is cut off from the whole world and closed in himself. For any normal sensibility, there is in any mysticism something disquietingly and objectively dangerous. Mysticism turns into the cloak that renders the mystic invisible. His soul is open to God, but because it is open only to God, it is invisible for the rest of the world and cut off from it. With an arrogant sense of security, the mystic turns the ring on his finger, and immediately he is with 'his' God and has nothing more to say to the world. . . . This relationship of the pure mystic with the world, which is fundamentally an immoral relationship, is absolutely necessary for him, if indeed he wants to confirm and safeguard his pure mystical state.³⁹

Ambivalence with regard to the moral status of mystical retreat is reflected as well in contemporary discussions. For instance, Ninian Smart notes that while there is an affinity between the contemplative and moral paths, as both require a high degree of self-control that facilitates purification of mind, it is not always easy to determine the ethical valence of a life that demands flight from the world of the interhuman.⁴⁰ According to one scholar's formulation, it is even appropriate to label asceticism a 'subversive virtue' as it stands potentially in conflict with existing social mores.⁴¹ Here it should be remembered that William James already recognized that the intense experiences of the mystic can lead to 'diabolical mysticism', that is, delusional insanity or paranoia, which constitutes 'a sort of religious mysticism turned upside down'. James noted, moreover, that in this region of subliminal or

³⁷ Ibid. 253.

³⁸ See Rubenstein, *Episode*, 60–2. On the attempt to link Rosenzweig's theological notion of relationality and the emphasis on the other in the ethical philosophy of Levinas, see Gibbs, *Correlations*, and Cohen, *Elevations*, but see the cautionary remarks of Rubenstein, *Episode*, 281–2, n. 42.

³⁹ Rosenzweig, *Star*, 223–4. In spite of Rosenzweig's criticism of mysticism, there are good grounds to argue that his own speech-thinking bears an interesting phenomenological resemblance to some features of the esoteric mysticism of kabbalah. See Wolfson, 'Facing', and references to other scholarly treatments cited there on p. 65, n. 125.

⁴⁰ Smart, *Dimensions*, 185–6.

⁴¹ Francis, *Subversive Virtue*. For a counter-example wherein the moral and ascetic coalesce, see the analysis of St Teresa of Avila in Hollenback, *Mysticism*, 505–10.

transmarginal consciousness, whence the higher and lower forms of mysticism emerge, seraph and snake abide side by side.⁴² In some contexts, therefore, mystical experience may lapse into immorality at least as the action is judged from the standpoint of social intercourse based on the binary of good and evil. The predicament is well captured by Richard Jones:

Moral action-guides are usually an integral part of mystical traditions' path to enlightenment (since such actions lessen a sense of self-centeredness). How morality on such paths would relate to the mystic's enlightened state is not clear. If morality is an integral part of the unenlightened life, must it be part of the enlightened life? Or does the mystic in enlightenment transcend morality? That is, is morality merely a tool on the unenlightened path that loses its significance after enlightenment? Is morality part of the temporal and not the eternal?⁴³

In the course of this work, I shall explore several issues that address the relationship of mysticism and morality in the specific history of medieval Jewish esoteric lore and practice, conventionally called by both practitioners and scholars 'kabbalah', a term that denotes 'tradition'. It should go without saying that kabbalah is not monolithic in nature; on the contrary, it is better described as a collage of disparate doctrines and practices cultivated by elite rabbinic circles from the Middle Ages to the present. It is a commonplace in contemporary scholarship to distinguish between two major typological trends of medieval kabbalah, theosophic and ecstatic.⁴⁴ The latter is focused on the cultivation of meditative practices centred around the divine names and the letters of the Hebrew alphabet that lead to prophetic and unitive states of consciousness, whereas the former is concerned primarily with the visual contemplation of the ten *sefirot*, the hypostatic potencies that collectively constitute the configuration of the Godhead.⁴⁵ I note, however, that this classification runs the risk of oversimplification. Careful scrutiny of the relevant texts indicates that kabbalists whom we dub as 'theosophic' were capable of ecstatic experiences of union, and that kabbalists labelled 'ecstatic' presumed that esoteric gnosis imparted theosophic wisdom. Moreover, shared traditions about the secret names of God, and particularly the most sacred of these names, YHWH, the sefirotic potencies as the means and end of

⁴² James, *Varieties*, 417. On the notion of diabolical mysticism and the psychopathology of mystical experience, see Barnard, *Exploring*, 75–8.

⁴³ Jones, *Mysticism*, 189–90. For further elaboration see id., *Mysticism and Morality*, 3–20.

⁴⁴ Gershom Scholem employed this typological classification and Moshe Idel has developed it further. For a brief review of the topic, see Tirosch-Rothschild, 'Continuity', 174–6.

⁴⁵ Useful introductions to the symbolism of the *sefirot* in medieval kabbalah can be found in Scholem, *Major Trends*, 211–17; id., *Kabbalah*, 96–116; Tishby, *Wisdom*, 269–307; Ginsburg, *Sabbath*, 24–36; Hallamish, *Introduction*, 121–66.

mystical communion, and the theurgical interpretation of ritual, bridge the presumed gap separating the proposed schools of kabbalah.⁴⁶

For the purposes of this study, I will concentrate my analysis on the multi-layered corpus of *Zohar*, the major sourcebook of theosophic symbolism that has informed the variegated evolution of kabbalistic thought and practice.⁴⁷ In each of the chapters, I shall venture considerably beyond the historical bounds of zoharic literature, exploring the topics of my philosophical inquiry in Lurianic, Sabbatian, and Hasidic sources. Nevertheless the initial paths of inquiry will arise from my engagement with zoharic material, for the latter provided the symbolic language that exercised a profound influence upon subsequent kabbalists. The literary units that make up the fabric of zoharic literature were composed and began to circulate in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, although it seems very likely that the final shaping of this material into the form of a book took place in the sixteenth century, at the time the material was being prepared for print in Mantua and Cremona.⁴⁸ A growing consensus in the field of kabbalah study is that the different strata of *Zohar*, composed in Hebrew and/or Aramaic, were products of a fraternity of kabbalists who assembled in the region of Castile.⁴⁹ Consistent with other Jewish mystical and pietistic fraternities of this period, the zoharic circle was elitist in its composition. The extant historical documents provide us with relatively sparse biographical information about the Spanish kabbalists who belonged to this circle. Nevertheless, from the style and substance of the relevant texts, we may conclude that they were either rabbinic leaders or had been trained in the talmudic academies and hence were well versed in classical Jewish learning. We can assume, moreover, that these kabbalists availed themselves of the religious institutions that served the rest of their extended communities. In that respect, it is doubtful that kabbalists were separated from the society at large, even though there is good reason to assume that they belonged to small fraternities made up exclusively of fellow practitioners. One must suppose that to some degree these circles functioned autonomously, laying claim to a secretive knowledge that explained the essence of Judaism but that was not readily available to all Jews in an equal manner.

The particular themes that I will discuss include the denigration of the non-Jew as the ontic other in kabbalistic anthropology (Chapter 1) and the

⁴⁶ The challenge to the typological distinction that has dominated the study of medieval Jewish mysticism is developed in the essays included in Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*.

⁴⁷ On the literary structure and authorship of the *Zohar*, see Scholem, *Major Trends*, 156–204; Tishby, *Wisdom*, 1–126, and reference to Liebes below, n. 49.

⁴⁸ See Huss, 'Sefer ha-Zohar'; Giller, *Reading the Zohar*; Abrams, 'Zohar as a Book'.

⁴⁹ For an extensive discussion of this hypothesis, see Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, 85–138. See also the imaginative reconstructions of Meroz, 'Zoharic Narratives'.

eschatological crossing of that boundary anticipated in the institution of religious conversion (Chapter 2); the overcoming of the distinction between good and evil in the mystical experience of the underlying unity of all things (Chapter 3); divine suffering and the ideal of spiritual poverty as the foundation for transmoral ethics and hypernomian lawfulness (Chapter 4). While this list by no means exhausts all of the pertinent questions that pertain to an analysis of ethics and mysticism, an exploration of these topics will provide an entry into this critical but relatively neglected field of inquiry. The few scholars who have written on the theme of mysticism and ethics in the case of Judaism have analysed sources that fall under the rubric of *sifrut musar*, which is typically translated as ‘ethical literature’. It is my contention that this locution has been determined by an internal consideration alone. That is to say, the issue of ethics in Jewish mysticism has been cast exclusively from the standpoint of treatises that stem from different cultural settings but that nevertheless all equally present a pietistic worldview promoting strict adherence to rabbinic ritual.⁵⁰ In the course of history, sundry currents of a mystical nature have enhanced the ideological framework of rabbinic pietism. Three examples of this phenomenon that began to have a discernible impact in the thirteenth century are: Ṣufi-like mysticism that fostered the experience of intellectual conjunction; the esoteric theology promulgated by the Rhineland Jewish pietists based on the meditational techniques of letter-combination and vocalization of the divine names, leading to the imaginary visualization of the divine glory; and the theosophic symbolism of the sefirotic kabbalah related to the contemplative vision of the imaginal body of God. All three religious movements produced treatises that are classified as *sifrut musar*, texts that sought to address the spiritual needs of the Jewish population at large by promoting an intensified rabbinic religiosity with particular emphasis on matters of social justice. Similar claims have been made for the kabbalistic-ethical literature that evolved in the sixteenth century, especially in the school

⁵⁰ This approach is typified by Dan, *Hebrew Ethical and Homiletical Literature*, 148–9, 151–62, 202–29, 240–1, 242–63; id., *Jewish Mysticism and Jewish Ethics*. See also Pachter, ‘Beginnings’; Shokek, *Jewish Ethics*, and *Repentance*; and the comment of Ajzenstat cited in Ch. 1, n. 28. The same critique is applicable to the comments of Tishby, *Wisdom*, 1329–30, and to Zafrani, *Éthique*. See also Manor, *Kabbale*. The author restricts his use of the term ethics or what he calls ‘théorie morale’ (p. xxi) to the pietistic theme of repentance, *teshuvah* (p. 200). The shortcoming of his approach is underscored in his statement that the distinctive role assigned to the Jewish people lacks any apologetic or polemic dimension, ‘for there is here no place for conflict between Israel and the nations of the world in the ethnological, racial, or cultural sphere. The nation of Israel does not appear as members of a just race who have a monopoly on religious truth, which would signal its superiority over the nations of the world. Rather, the divine reality is in the garb of the human, and the human Israel the elder is identical to the divine Israel the elder.’ The patent absurdity of denying cultural superiority or even singularity to the Jews on the one hand, and depicting the earthly Israel as the embodiment of the divine on the other, should be obvious to the reader.

of the Safedian kabbalist Moses Cordovero, and continued to flourish in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁵¹

No previous scholar, to the best of my knowledge, has asked the harder question concerning the appropriateness or inappropriateness of applying the term 'ethical' to this material. To answer this query, one must probe more critically into the anthropology underlying these pietistic texts, related to such issues as the attitude of Judaism to other religious cultures or towards women. That there is a strong *ethos* tied to the notion of *ethnos*, a distinctive sense of custom correlated with a specific portion of the human community, communicated in these compositions is not in question. As a number of scholars have noted, one of the most important features of the kabbalah is that it provided a rationale for normative observance by ascribing cosmic significance to every one of the traditional commandments, and thereby furnished a powerful motivation to impel Jews to follow the path of nomian observance.⁵² If this is the standard by which we evaluate the appropriateness of using the term 'ethical' to characterize the pietistic sources influenced by the kabbalah, then we are justified in speaking of kabbalistic ethics.⁵³ If, however, we move from a sense of *ethos* to the ethical,⁵⁴ then we must evaluate whether or not these texts exemplify a perspective that is indeed moralistic in nature.

Let me conclude this introduction by noting that in our time there has been a marked increase of interest in mysticism and the occult, which in part can be explained by a dissatisfaction with conventional forms of Western monotheism (particularly in Christian and Jewish congregations of different denominations) and the consequent quest for authentic religiosity (or spirituality as it is often called). Given the alluring power of the mystical, it is all the more imperative to test the mystical phenomenon as it has been articulated within different historical contexts by its ethical implications.⁵⁵

⁵¹ In addition to the references cited in the previous note, see Pachter, 'Sefer Reshit Hōkhmah'; Sack, 'Influence'.

⁵² A representation of relevant studies includes: Faiersstein, "God's Need for the Commandments"; Katz, *Divine Law*, 9–87; Matt, 'Mystic and the *Mizwa'*'; Wolfson, 'Mystical Rationalization'; id., *Abraham Abulafia*, 178–228; Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, 156–99; Tishby, *Wisdom*, 1155–213; Giller, *Enlightened*, 81–105; Mopsik, *Les Grands Textes*.

⁵³ On the propagandistic proclivity of kabbalistic-ethical literature, see Idel, 'On Mobility', 164.

⁵⁴ The distinction I am making between 'ethos' and 'ethical' reflects a conversation about my work that I had with Zachary Braiterman several years ago. I am grateful to him for his useful comments and keen insight.

⁵⁵ It is of interest to recall here that in his letter to Bialik, which was written in 1925, Scholem remarked that his philological and historical methodology was driven by the philosophical question pertaining to the value (*erekh*) of kabbalah. The text is published in Scholem, *Explications and Implications*, 63. In my judgement, Scholem was intimating that the ultimate concern of the scholar of kabbalah should lie in determining its value as an ethical force in Jewish history, both in the past and in the present. For a brief discussion of this passage, see Funkenstein, 'Gershom Scholem', 125–6.

Falling short of a moral standard may not challenge the validity of the mystical dimension of a specific tradition, but it does render that tradition problematic as an ideal that would regulate the belief and behaviour of a religious community. These reflections on mysticism and ethics in the history of kabbalistic speculation, therefore, should be seen as more than an academic exercise in historiographical scholarship. They are nothing less than one individual's attempt to pierce beneath the veil of an admittedly seductive symbolism to determine the ultimate ethical meaning of a particular mystical path. The critical investigation of the primary literary sources provides an opportunity for an alchemical transmutation of the tradition by means of which the cultural dross may be discarded. That which remains submerged, however, never stands a chance of being cast aside and, consequently, the stone can never be turned to gold.

1

Ontology, Alterity, and the Anthropological Other

A Truth that's told with bad intent
Beats all the Lies you can invent
(William Blake, 'Auguries of Innocence')

In the first chapter I shall consider to what extent the kabbalistic orientation fostered a sense of social consciousness and a call to moral action on behalf of the human community at large. In my judgement, the study of ethics in the kabbalistic tradition must begin with a proper understanding of the ontological place it accorded non-Jewish nations. In this regard I am naturally indebted to a host of philosophers who have identified in one way or another the centrality of the status of the other in ethical discourse.¹ Indeed, as one contemporary philosopher reminds us, the sense of the other entailed in the notion of obligation must 'include not only other human beings but what is other than human—animals. e.g., or other living things generally, and even the earth itself'.² Perhaps no single thinker has been more insistent on emphasizing the importance of the other to the ethical project than Emmanuel Levinas. The example of Levinas is particularly relevant inasmuch as he maintained that the uniqueness of Judaism as a religious culture lies in the fact that the theological belief in the utterly transcendent God, a transcendence that transcends the traditional notion of divine transcendence,³ is the basis for the moral principle concerning the irreducible dignity of the other human subject.⁴

¹ See e.g. Taylor, *Alterity*; Farley, *Eros*; Wyschogrod, *Ethics*; Glendinning, *On Being*.

² Caputo, *Against Ethics*, 5.

³ Cohen, *Ethics*, 223.

⁴ Peperzak, 'Transcendence'; Scott, 'Sense of Transcendence'. The primacy of the ethical in the religious sensibility is evident in the following comment of Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, 146: 'In the name of God. But this is without thematization; the sentence in which God gets mixed in with words is not "I believe in God." The religious discourse that precedes all religious discourse is not dialogic. It is the "here I am" said to a neighbor to whom I am given over, by

The ethical relation will appear to Judaism as an exceptional relation: in it, contact with an external being, instead of compromising human sovereignty, institutes and invests it. . . . Judaism teaches us real transcendence, a relation to Him Whom the soul cannot concern and without Whom the soul cannot, in some sense, hold itself together. . . . Self-consciousness is not an inoffensive action in which the self takes note of its being; it is inseparable from a consciousness of justice and injustice. . . . The moral relation therefore reunites both self-consciousness and consciousness of God. Ethics is not the corollary of the vision of God, it is that very vision. Ethics is an optic, such that everything I know of God and everything I can hear of His word and reasonably say to Him must find an ethical expression. . . . The role played by ethics in the religious relation allows us to understand the meaning of Jewish universalism.⁵

A truth is universal ‘when it applies to every reasonable being’, and consequently a religion is universal only ‘when it is open to all. In this sense, the Judaism that links the Divine to the moral has always aspired to be universal.’⁶ Israel’s vocation, its ‘concrete universality’, is related to its historical mission to serve as the foundation to ground the belief in the ‘unity of the consciousness of mankind, claiming to be fraternal and one through time and space’.⁷ To speak of the ‘humanity of the Jew’, therefore, is to intend the ‘Jew in every man’.⁸ Alternatively expressed, the ‘authentically human is the being-Jewish in all men . . . and its reflection in the singular and the particular’.⁹ For Levinas, there is no conflict between the universal and particular; on the contrary, the ‘absolutely universal’, which is the divinity that constitutes the essence of spiritual life, ‘can be served in purity only through the particularity of each people, a particularity named enrootedness’.¹⁰ Tackling one of the most problematic ideas that has shaped the Jewish sensibility from biblical times to the present, the idea of Israel’s election, Levinas insists that chosenness is not a ‘scandal of pride and of the will to power’, but a ‘moral conscience itself which, made up of responsibilities that are always urgent

which I announce peace, that is, my responsibility for the other.’ See also Levinas, ‘On the Jewish Reading of Scriptures’, 24: ‘Ethics is not simply the corollary of the religious but is, of itself, the element in which religious transcendence receives its original meaning.’ For an elaborate discussion of this theme, see Bloechl, ‘Ethics’.

⁵ Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 16–17.

⁶ *Ibid.* 21. See Meskin, ‘Other’; Chaliier, ‘Philosophy’; Gibbs, ‘Height’; Wright, *Twilight*, 141–72.

⁷ Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, 6. For fuller discussion of the inclusion of the nations in Israel’s quest for the unity related to its messianic mission, see *id.*, *In the Time*, 92–108. See *ibid.* 144: ‘To be with the nations is also to be for the nations. The consciousness of that universalist singularity is ancient, and proper to the Jewish mentality.’

⁸ Levinas, *Beyond the Verse*, 4.

⁹ *In the Time*, 164.

¹⁰ *Difficult Freedom*, 136.

and non-transferable, is the first to respond'.¹¹ The 'particularism' of Judaism as a religious culture, expressed especially in its ritual laws, 'conditions universality, and it is a moral category rather than a historical fact to do with Israel, even if the historical Israel has in fact been faithful to the concept of Israel and, on the subject of morality, felt responsibilities and obligations which it demands from no one, but which sustain the world'.¹² Levinas goes so far as to say that 'the idea of Israel as a chosen people, which seems to contradict the idea of universality, is in reality the founding of tolerance'. The sense of being chosen 'expresses less the pride of someone who has been called than the humility of someone who serves. Being chosen is no more appalling as a condition than being the place for all moral consciousness.' In the case of Judaism, 'the certainty of the absolute's hold over man—or religion—does not turn into an imperialist expansion that devours all those who deny it. It burns *inwards*, as an infinite demand made on oneself, an infinite responsibility.' Judaism, in the mind of Levinas, is responsible for the 'rehabilitation of tolerance in Christian and Islamic thought, and has brought such a message to the whole of the modern world'.¹³

Thinking and writing in the shadow of the Holocaust, Levinas is passionately committed to the idea that Jews have been and must remain witnesses to human suffering through the course of history.¹⁴ Hence, commenting on one talmudic passage that speaks of the need to close all doors and windows to the outside world when an epidemic strikes, Levinas writes: 'All men are of Israel. In my way, I would say: "We are all Israeli Jews." We, that is, all human beings. This interiority is the suffering of Israel as universal suffering.'¹⁵

It is precisely because of their inordinate torment through time that Jews are endowed with the ethical task of speaking out against the subjugation and

¹¹ *Beyond the Verse*, p. xvi. In *Difficult Freedom*, 26, Levinas remarks that the notion of being chosen 'can degenerate into that of pride but originally expresses the awareness of an indisputable assignation from which an ethics springs and through which the universality of the end being pursued involves the solitude and isolation of the individual responsible'. On the defence against the charge that the characterization of the Jews as the chosen people is an affront to its universalism, see *ibid.* 176–7.

¹² *Difficult Freedom*, 22.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 174. See 137–8.

¹⁴ *Beyond the Verse*, pp. xvi, 3. See *Difficult Freedom*, 70: 'Israel is in mourning, Israel is suffering. This suffering, in the absence of repentance, is the condition for its salvation.' The significance of suffering is well summarized in the following comment in Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 69: 'The content of suffering merges with the impossibility of detaching oneself from suffering. And this is not to define suffering by suffering, but to insist on the *sui generis* implication that constitutes its essence. In suffering there is an absence of all refuge. It is the act of being directly exposed to being. It is made up of the impossibility of fleeing or retreating. The whole acuity of suffering lies in this impossibility of retreat. It is the fact of being backed up against life and being. In this sense suffering is the impossibility of nothingness.'

¹⁵ *Nine Talmudic Readings*, 191.

dehumanization of the other. Levinas has this moral mission in mind when he proclaims that Judaism is not ‘simply a nationality’, but it is ‘a rupture of the natural and the historical that are constantly reconstituted’. The way of Israel bespeaks ‘the destiny of a people that is jostled and jostles through its daily life that which, in this life, is content with its natural or “historical” meaning. A thought which precociously and untiringly denounces the cruel, excesses of power, and all arbitrary rule.’ The ‘apparent conservatism’ of the Jewish religion ‘expresses above all the obstinate negation of a political and social order which remains without regard for the weak, and without pity for the vanquished’.¹⁶ Even the creation of the modern state of Israel is to be understood in light of this ethical mandate.¹⁷

The eternity of the Jewish people is not the pride of a nationalism exacerbated by persecution. Independence in the face of history affirms the right possessed by human consciousness to judge a world that is ripe at every moment for judgement, before the end of history and independently of this end—that is to say, a world peopled by persons.¹⁸

Far from being a political ideology inspired by the aspiration for nationalist determination and territorial domination, Zionism is what ‘makes possible a Western Jew, Jewish and Greek, *everywhere*’.¹⁹ From its inception the Jewish hope for self-assertion within the geographical boundaries of the land of Palestine entailed ‘responsibility for everyone’, an idea linked exegetically by Levinas to the verse ‘Out of Zion shall go forth Torah’ (Micah 4: 2), and thus Zionism ‘is both politics and already non-politics, epic and Passion, irrepressible energy and extreme vulnerability. After the realism of its political formulations at the beginning, Zionism is finally revealing itself, on the scale of substantial Judaism, as a great ambition of the Spirit.’²⁰

According to Levinas, as one contemporary philosopher put it, the Hebraic lineage imparts ‘a return not to transcendental consciousness but to the transcendent meaning of a covenant with God that calls us preconsciously to be in God’s hearing as we name what is good and bad. It is a tribal call . . . to universalize by fundamental values and rights a particularity that gives us our

¹⁶ *Beyond the Verse*, 4.

¹⁷ *Nine Talmudic Readings*, 9.

¹⁸ *Difficult Freedom*, 201.

¹⁹ *Nine Talmudic Readings*, 10. On the notion of the ‘Western Jew’, see *ibid.* 33, and *Difficult Freedom*, 104. See also *In the Time*, 113: ‘The notion of the human, henceforth, was conceived and interpreted as it had one day been interpreted in the Torah by the Westerner—the future Christian.’

²⁰ *Beyond the Verse*, 191. See *ibid.* 52: ‘Our text, which began with the cities of refuge, reminds us or teaches us that the longing for Zion, that Zionism, is not one more nationalism or particularism; nor is it a simple search for a place of refuge. It is the hope of a science of society, and of a society, which are wholly human.’

names and values, even when we are otherwise exiled and homeless.²¹ The account of kabbalistic anthropology presented in this chapter, which is based in some measure on motifs expressed in previous rabbinic sources, should give one reservation about accepting this overly optimistic orientation without qualification, although I readily acknowledge that Levinas self-consciously did not speak as a historian of texts or as a philologist but as a philosophical exegete.²² Even so, there must be a measure of philological/historical accountability if we are to take the textual reasoning seriously; in the absence of linguistic aptitude, claims to eliciting philosophical meaning from a particular text are severely challenged.

Here it is incumbent upon me to note that the attempt on the part of Levinas to adduce a universal ethical principle on the basis of the mystical pietism enunciated in *Nefesh ha-Ḥayyim* of Ḥayyim of Volozhyn, disciple of Elijah ben Solomon, better known as the Gaon of Vilna²³—a project that is related to the larger endeavour of Levinas to demonstrate that Athens and Jerusalem are not to be set in binary opposition, that philosophical ideas are implicit in rabbinic texts²⁴—is predicated on the erroneous view that *adam* in this text denotes humanity in general rather than the Jews in particular.²⁵ To be sure, Levinas does acknowledge the unique role assigned to the Jewish people in Ḥayyim of Volozhyn's kabbalistic scheme, but the conclusions he

²¹ Scott, 'People's Witness', 34.

²² *Nine Talmudic Readings*, 6–9, 91–2. Even though Levinas states explicitly that he did not write with the authority of a talmudic scholar, he also did not conceive his task as simply apologetic or homiletic. See e.g. *Beyond the Verse*, 117.

²³ For a detailed analysis of this seminal thinker, see Lamm, *Torah Lishmah*.

²⁴ See e.g. *Nine Talmudic Readings*, 4–5. In *Difficult Freedom*, 15, Levinas predictably links the 'synthesis of the Jewish revelation and Greek thought' to Maimonides.

²⁵ See *Beyond the Verse*, 151–67, and the preface of Levinas to Ḥayyim of Volozhyn, *L'Âme de la vie*, pp. vii–x. See also the various comments in Cohen, *Elevations*, 131–2, 158–9, 268–70, 271–2. For another example of the universalist approach applied specifically to the theme of prayer in *Nefesh ha-Ḥayyim*, see Levinas, 'Prayer Without Demand', and analysis in Wright, *Twilight*, 128–33. See also *In the Time*, 127–32. With all of his focus on alterity, it is curious that Levinas's discussions on the other within, i.e. the feminine, and on the other without, i.e. the Gentile, within the economy of rabbinic texts strike me as overly apologetic. In a separate study I hope to engage this issue in greater detail. The most sustained discussions of the feminine and Judaism on the part of Levinas appear in the essay 'Judaism and the Feminine', in *Difficult Freedom*, 30–8, and in the lecture 'And God Created Woman', included in *Nine Talmudic Readings*, 161–77. For a representative sampling of scholarly analyses, see Katz, *Levinas, Judaism, and the Feminine*; id., 'From Eros to Maternity'; Shapiro, '“And God Created Woman”'. For more general discussions on the construction of the feminine in the writings of Levinas, see Irigaray, 'Questions'; id., *Ethics of Sexual Difference*, 185–217; id., 'What Other?'; Chalier, 'Ethics and the Feminine'; Chanter, 'Antigone's Dilemma'; id., 'Feminism and the Other'; Cohen, *Elevations*, 195–219; Ainley, 'Feminine, Otherness, Dwelling'; Sandford, *Metaphysics of Love*; id., 'Levinas, Feminism, and the Feminine'; Kayser, *Emmanuel Levinas*; and the collection of essays edited by Chanter, *Feminist Interpretations*.

draws from this treatise regarding the ‘humanity of man’²⁶ are misguided, inasmuch as the orientation embraced by the author of *Nefesh ha-Ḥayyim* follows the zoharic tradition by identifying the human being in the most precise sense as the Jew, and hence references to *adam*, when interpreted contextually, relate specifically to the Jews.²⁷ When the anthropological matter is set straight, it is difficult to find a justification for utilizing this classic of eighteenth-century Lithuanian rabbinic piety to derive a truth about ‘human ethical behavior’ in universalistic terms.²⁸

My discussion in this chapter will focus on intersubjective alterity reflected in the place accorded the non-Jew within zoharic ontology. The emphasis on ontology reflects the way of thinking adopted by kabbalists from the thirteenth century until the present, but it does not indicate my own personal preference or what I would consider an adequate approach to moral theory and practice. In the pre-Kantian²⁹ world in which traditional kabbalistic symbolism was formulated, there is no justification for separating ontology and axiology: for kabbalists, value is grounded in the nature of being.³⁰

As I noted briefly in the Introduction, scholars who have written about kabbalistic ethics have usually ignored the question of the position of the non-Jewish other in the ontological scheme that informs kabbalistic theosophy and anthropology.³¹ The point is epitomized in Yitzhak Baer’s seminal study

²⁶ *Beyond the Verse*, 156.

²⁷ See e.g. Ḥayyim of Volozhyn, *Nefesh ha-Ḥayyim*, I, 5, pp. 12–13; III.10, pp. 172–5.

²⁸ Cohen, *Elevations*, 269. My criticism would extend as well to the remark of Ajzenstat, *Driven Back*, 170, that the ‘centrality of ethics to Luria makes a comparison with Levinas immediately attractive’. I am doubtful of the appropriateness of the use of the term ‘ethics’ to describe Lurianic kabbalah if it implies some universal standard, as we would expect from a comparison with Levinas. The failure on Ajzenstat’s part to grasp the ethnocentric dimension of Lurianic anthropology is captured in her comment that ‘Luria encompasses *all* human beings in a grand vision similar in scope to other cosmogonies, cosmologies, and, indeed, ontologies’ (pp. 171–2; emphasis in the original). While Luria’s teaching does, of course, relate to all human beings, his primary concern is the status of the Jewish people vis-à-vis their divine counterpart in the imaginal physiognomy of the divine human. Tishby, *Doctrine of Evil*, 139, correctly observed that the messianic rectification of the world (*tiqqun ha-olam*) according to the kabbalah of Luria is achieved when the seventy non-Jewish nations, the source of the demonic power, are destroyed.

²⁹ By describing the world in which kabbalistic symbolism was formulated as ‘pre-Kantian’, I am simply suggesting that prior to Kant’s critique the homology of ontology and axiology was largely uncontested. I do not mean to deny that Kant himself continued to wrestle with the notion that values are inscribed in the nature of being even as he promoted a constructivist epistemology. See Seung, *Kant’s Platonic Revolution*.

³⁰ For an attempt to separate the two, see Putnam, *Ethics Without Ontology*. See also the discussion regarding the possibility of a ‘non-metaphysical ethics’ in Marx, *Towards a Phenomenological Ethics*, 31–67.

³¹ This is not to say that scholars have not been interested in the portrayals of Christianity and Islam, represented symbolically by the biblical terms Edom and Ishmael, in kabbalistic literature. Indeed, the antagonism expressed, for instance, in zoharic homilies towards Jesus and

on the history of Jews in Christian Spain after the reconquest. Baer called his chapter on thirteenth-century Catalonian and Castilian kabbalists, 'Mysticism and Social Reform'.³² He argued that kabbalists, particularly as presented in the later strata of the zoharic corpus,³³ belonged to an inferior social and economic class and that they vigorously attacked the courtier aristocracy, amongst them the rabbinic leaders. Thus, according to this presentation, kabbalists sought to improve the moral and religious life of the Jewish masses. Baer writes: 'A marked affinity existed between the ideologies of the ascetics and mystics and the aims of the practical reformers bent upon achieving a higher standard of social morality.'³⁴

Without challenging the main thrust of Baer's historical analysis, I would question the appropriateness of the locution 'ethical-social reform' to characterize the mystical speculations and practices of kabbalists. Baer is surely correct in saying that the intent of the kabbalist moralists was to improve the pietistic standard of Jewish society by attacking ethical deficiencies of the populace and of failure to curb them on the part of the rabbinic leadership. Nonetheless, the suitability of his terminology to depict kabbalistic sources is an issue that needs to be addressed. The first and obvious query is, does the concern with social morality refer to the Jewish people only or to humanity at large? Does the moral standard embraced by kabbalists reflect a narrow ethnocentrism or a broad universalism? Has the utilization of terms like 'ethics' and 'social reform' prevented scholars from appreciating a leitmotif of this material? From my perspective the suitability of such terms to the esoteric tradition depends on a careful exploration of the symbolic constructions of the other that informed the major kabbalistic texts. Before we adopt this terminology we must probe the ethnocentric assertions strewn throughout the literature, especially the anthropological presumption that humanity in its most ideal sense refers to Israel alone.³⁵ Can a mystical tradition that

Christians has been duly noted by Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, 149–50, 154–61, 244, n. 92. On the attitude towards Christianity and Islam in zoharic literature, see also Tishby, *Wisdom*, 68–71, and the study by Kiener, 'Image of Islam'. For additional studies, see Ch. 2, n. 1. My point, however, concerns the implications of these symbolic portrayals for the ethical attitude of the theosophic symbolism adopted by the kabbalists. On this question I have found little discussion in previous scholarship, especially by scholars who have focused on the issue of ethics and the kabbalah. For references, see Introduction, n. 50.

³² Baer, *History*, 1: 243–305.

³³ See *ibid.* 261–77, and Baer, 'Historical Background'.

³⁴ *History*, 1: 250.

³⁵ On the indigenous particularism of Jewish ethics, in contrast to the universalism of both Christianity and philosophical ethics, see Newman, *Past Imperatives*, 105–6. Interestingly, Newman does not feel that the use of the term 'ethics' is in any way challenged by this particularism. As he puts the matter, 'Jewish ethics concerns the moral life of a certain people with a unique relationship to God. Jewish ethics is of Jews, by Jews, and for Jews. To be sure, Jews address

ontologizes ethnic difference foster genuine social reform by promoting an ethical standard of behaviour as Baer proposed?³⁶ Is it appropriate to speak, as some scholars have done, of a genre of literature composed of ethico-kabbalistic treatises? In what sense is the term 'ethical' meaningful in this material?

I would like to contextualize more precisely the framing of the other in the theosophic symbolism of medieval kabbalah; needless to say, such framing is an integral part of self-definition. The tendency to divide an environment into 'we' and 'they' is instinctual, originating probably in the most elemental biological form of territorialism.³⁷ Even advanced aspects of human culture, cognitive apprehension and linguistic discourse, are predicated on acts of differentiation. It stands to reason, therefore, that one's self-understanding in great measure will be predicated on determining social and cultural otherness.³⁸ From that vantage-point it is no exaggeration to say that the attitude towards the other is a key factor in drawing the boundaries that set the contours of identity of a given group.

In medieval kabbalistic sources, the construction of alterity occurs in context of historical contingencies that fostered negative stereotypes of the other.³⁹ We cannot stand in moral judgement of medieval kabbalists when our

ethical issues of general human concern, and sometimes reflect on the ethical responsibilities of non-Jews. But these concerns are generally peripheral to their central focus' (p. 106). A similar view is expressed by Wyschogrod, *Body of Faith*, 215–18. Also relevant are the remarks of Biderman, 'Jewish Ethics', 335–8. Biderman duly notes the tension in Jewish ethics between the original particularistic nature of biblical injunctions and their subsequent universalistic amplification. The ethnocentric implications of this particularism as it is expressed in kabbalistic literature gives me pause regarding the legitimacy of speaking of a Jewish *ethics* that either ignores or demeans non-Jews.

³⁶ Lewis, *Jews of Islam*, 88, remarked that both rationalist relativism and mystical pantheism in medieval rabbinic elites contributed to a mutually tolerant attitude. My study of kabbalistic sources, which embrace a form of mystical pantheism in the emphasis that is placed on the divine nature as the underlying unity of all reality, has not convinced me of the veracity of this position. It is also apposite to recall the reflections of Abelson, *Jewish Mysticism*, 2–7, regarding the presumed universalism of the mystical orientation on the one hand, and the nationalistic particularism upheld by Jewish mystics on the other. As Abelson correctly points out, in the case of Jewish mystics, it is erroneous to bifurcate the two poles. Reflecting the spiritual physiognomy of Judaism more generally, for the mystics as well, the universal and national 'are inextricably combined, warp and woof of one texture' (p. 5).

³⁷ Redfield, *Primitive World*, 92.

³⁸ See Smith, 'What A Difference'; id., 'Differential Equations'.

³⁹ See Katz, *Tradition*, 16–17. It should be noted that even in its medieval context the combative tone of polemic against other religions found in kabbalistic sources (especially overt in zoharic literature) stands in contrast to the somewhat more irenic style employed in Jewish texts from the same period. On this matter, see Pulcini, *Exegesis as Polemical Discourse*, 49–50. See, however, Mark, 'Kabbalistic *Tocinofobia*', 165. After noting the zoharic portrayal of Gentiles as animals and demons, Mark comments: 'It is important to remember that these aspects of cultural distinction, which appear throughout *Zohar*, did not emerge in a vacuum but rather as part of *convivencia*, where ethnically and religiously diverse groups each contributed

own attitude is shaped by the present social, political, and economic realities: to do so would be anachronistic. Nevertheless, we are obliged to investigate the symbolic rhetoric of kabbalistic material and its effect on later Jewish attitudes towards the other, particularly as this rhetoric pertains to the relationship between ethics and mysticism. Although I personally would not condone the use of kabbalistic ideas to justify either the right-wing political agenda in the state of Israel or the tacit denunciation of non-Jews by certain segments of the ultra-orthodox Jewish community elsewhere, as a scholar I would argue that these applications do not necessarily distort the sources as some more liberal-minded Jews might claim. On the contrary, a significant number of recently published works written by individuals influenced by the symbolism of traditional kabbalah depict Islam (under the guise of the biblical typology 'Ishmael') and Christianity (portrayed as 'Edom') in overtly negative, at times even demonic, terms; these works accurately reinscribe attitudes that arose in the medieval setting. What is noteworthy is that the rhetoric of hatred forged in the crucible of medieval animosity continues to be used in the service of a present-day political programme.⁴⁰ In the concluding section of this chapter I shall provide a few examples to illustrate the lingering impact of the detrimental attitude towards non-Jewish nations fostered by traditional kabbalistic symbolism.⁴¹ Suffice it here to note that the task of responsible scholarship is to acknowledge the reverberations of

towards a more broadly defined sense of organized society and where commingling was frowned upon by officials of every side.' On the demarcation of the Jew in medieval Christian Europe as the 'other' by means of colour discrimination, see Pastoureau, *Une histoire symbolique du Moyen Âge*, 204–5. For a relatively recent analysis of the long-acknowledged nexus of Jewishness and alterity, see Benbassa and Attias, *Jew and the Other*.

⁴⁰ See e.g. Baruch Shalom Ashlag, son of the Polish kabbalist Yehudah Ashlag, who writes in his *Dargot ha-Sullam*, 2: 35: 'And this is the precise import of "the one who establishes one soul in Israel" [Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 37a; see below at n. 109], that is, the intent is with regard to the soul in the aspect of Israel but not the nations of the world... Therefore, the allusion is to Israel, that is, "you are called *adam* but the nations of the world are not called *adam*", for every spiritual matter of necessity must have a grounding in physicality.' Another good illustration of my point is found in David ben Isaac, *Sefer Adam ha-Ri'shon* (printed in Israel, 1991). This work, which is an anthology of rabbinic, kabbalistic, and Hasidic texts about Adam and Eve, reflecting in particular the orientation of Naḥman of Bratslav, is based on the premise (stated at the very outset) that the soul of primal Adam comprised the 600,000 souls of the adult Jewish males (p. 2). In the most exact sense, therefore, humanity refers to the Jewish nation, which is constituted primarily, at least according to rabbinic teaching, by men.

⁴¹ In the introduction to the kabbalistic work *Sefer Ma'yan ha-Hokhmah* (published in Jerusalem, 1999), there is a section that recounts the miracles that occurred to the Jews living in Israel during the Gulf War. The force of Amaleq is explicitly identified with Sadaam Hussein, an association justified by the observation that the word *ba-amaleq* is numerically equivalent to *be-sa'ada'm ḥusein* (both expressions equal 242). The biblical promise of the battle of God against Amaleq is thus applied exegetically to the war against Iraq. The identification of the main adversary of the Jewish people as the biblical Amaleq is a well-attested phenomenon in

these ideas in contemporary compositions, which undoubtedly have an influence on the current socio-political scene, even though we want to avoid ethical condemnation of a tradition shaped in a different time. In short, we need to navigate between the extremes of pious apologetic and moral dogmatism.

OTHERING FROM WITHOUT: DEMONIZATION OF THE NATIONS OF THE WORLD

As I have already noted, an explanation of the relationship of mysticism and social reform requires in the first instance a determination of the anthropological conception underlying the symbolism that informs the particular beliefs and practices of a given mystical community.⁴² For the purposes of this chapter, I will limit my primary analysis to the corpus of the *Zohar*, the main document of medieval kabbalah whose redaction and circulation began in earnest in the last decades of the thirteenth century, but I shall also trace the pronounced influence of the zoharic conception in subsequent works, especially the so-called treatises of kabbalistic ethics written in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the period when this literary genre flourished.

Before I turn to an analysis of zoharic texts, I will offer the following methodological observation. With respect to many of their most important themes kabbalistic texts exemplify a remarkable degree of homogeneity; surprisingly, changes in time and place have hardly had any effect at all. This textual phenomenon can be explained in part by the fact that the conditions of production and consumption of kabbalistic ideas and practices have been so severely limited through the ages, restricted as it was to men with rabbinic training, that there is little change with regard to the major themes that engaged their imagination. I would suggest that had these conditions been more diverse, the range of attitudes reflected in the sources would have been wider, as we find today in some socio-political contexts within the taxonomic rubric of world Jewry. But the historical reality is that in the formative period when kabbalah emerged as an identifiable phenomenon,

rabbinic sources through the ages. An especially poignant example is the depiction of the Nazis in this manner on the part of Orthodox Jewish thinkers in the time of the Second World War. For discussion of this motif, see Greenberg, 'Amalek'.

⁴² In the earlier version of this chapter, 'Ontology', I neglected to mention the study of Ḥallamish, 'Relation'. See also Mark, 'Kabbalistic *Tocinofobia*', 178–9, n. 62. For an illustration of a scholarly treatment of the 'human soul' in kabbalistic literature that obfuscates the ethnocentric, see Hayoun, *Le Zohar*, 261–300.

variety in social context is simply absent or, at the very least, not detectable by the instruments and canons of critical scholarship.

I sympathize with the postmodern tendency to seek multiple voices in the reading of texts, and I applaud the attempt (inspired in no small measure by feminist criticism) to avoid a singular and hegemonic hermeneutic. However, in the case of traditional kabbalistic sources, I submit that the general invariability and redundancy are due to male exclusivity and social homogeneity fostered by the augmented androcentrism of medieval rabbinic culture. Of course, kabbalistic texts yield a range of opinions on any number of theological, anthropological, and cosmological issues; but the point is that with respect to many major themes, like the one that I will discuss here, uniformity is far more striking than diversity.⁴³

What guiding principle informs the symbolic world of zoharic literature regarding the nature of humanity, a concept that arguably lies at the foundation of any ethical orientation? In the various literary strata of the zoharic anthology, a consistent anthropological picture emerges: Israel is portrayed as the 'holy seed' (*zar'a qaddisha*),⁴⁴ whereas the other nations of the world (with the possible exception of Islam, according to some passages to be discussed in more detail in the next chapter) are said to derive from the demonic 'other side' (*siṭra aḥra*), the realm of ten impure potencies on the left that correspond to ten holy *sefirot* on the right.⁴⁵ In some measure, the

⁴³ Lest there be any misunderstanding, let me emphasize that I acknowledge that some kabbalists did adopt a more universalistic approach to their understanding of human nature. Consider, for example, the utilization of the classical and medieval philosophical classification of the human being (*adam*) as one who possesses an intellect (*ba'al sekhel*) in Jacob ben Sheshet, *Sefer Meshiv Devarim Nekhoḥim*, 154. As far as I can ascertain, the context does not warrant an ethnocentric interpretation of this taxonomy.

⁴⁴ *Zohar* 2: 6a, 78b, 124a, 125a; 2: 88b; 3: 152b, 237a. In several passages, the expression 'holy seed' is applied more specifically to Isaac. See *Zohar* 1: 95a, 99b (*Sitrei Torah*), 103b, 110a, 223b. In these passages as well, however, the ultimate implication is that the Jews, who trace their lineage back to Abraham through Isaac, are the holy seed in contrast to the impurity of the other nations, especially Ishmael, the other son of Abraham. Baer, *History*, 1: 246, touches briefly on the metaphysical significance of the ethnic concept of the 'holy seed' in kabbalistic sources. The term itself is derived from Isa. 6: 13 (*zera qodesh*) and Ezra 9: 2 (*zera ha-qodesh*). The latter occurrence, in particular, engaged the imagination of subsequent Pharisaic and rabbinic exegetes as the verse clearly suggests a midrashic reworking of the deuteronomist prohibitions based on a more rigid dichotomy separating Israel and the nations. See Jubilees 2: 19–20, 25: 3; *Leviticus Rabbah* 16: 1, p. 345; *Lamentations Rabbah* 4: 18; Japhet, 'People', 114–15; Kugel, 'Holiness', 23–4; and the analysis of a cluster of exegetical themes that underscore the privileged status of Jacob/Israel in id., '4Q369'.

⁴⁵ See Katz, *Tradition*, 23–4; Ḥallamish, 'Relation', 289–97; Huss, *Sockets*, 157. For discussion of the problem of evil and the demonic potencies in kabbalistic symbolism, see Scholem, *Major Trends*, 35–6, 235–9; id., *Kabbalah*, 122–8; id., *On the Mystical Shape*, 56–87; Tishby, *Wisdom*, 447–546; Idel, 'Evil Thought'; Dan, 'Samael'; Wolfson, 'Left Contained'; id., 'Light Through Darkness'; Farber-Ginat, "'Shell Precedes'".

attitude expressed in zoharic literature, and confirmed in a plethora of other kabbalistic sources, is an elaboration of a position articulated in earlier rabbinic texts, which in turn echo an ethnocentric orientation, or symbolic bent, evident in parts of what became the scriptural canon as well as other literary sources from late Second Temple Judaism, especially documents that issued from priestly scribes like the author of Jubilees, the part of 1 Enoch known as the 'Book of Watchers', Wisdom of Jesus ben Sira, Manual of Discipline, Damascus Document, War Scroll, Hodayot, and numerous other fragments recovered from the caves of Qumran.⁴⁶ I note, in passing, that there are many similarities that link the pietistic norms and ideals fashioned at a later date by rabbinic scribes and the goals marked in the texts composed by the priestly literati who set out to establish an eschatological community in the desert, breaking with the Maccabean aristocracy in all likelihood sometime between 160 and 134 BCE. Rabbinic Judaism is generally portrayed as evolving from the Pharisees, the sect that opposed the Essenes and Sadducees, the two other major factions of Palestinian Judaism in Late Antiquity, according to the discussions of Philo, Josephus, and, to a lesser extent, Pliny the Elder. I do not offer a thoroughgoing challenge to this stance, but I do wish to underscore that affirming the Pharisaic roots of rabbinism should not blind one from seeing the deep affinities between the scholastic asceticism cultivated by the rabbis and the angelic quietism promulgated by the priestly scribes, bearers of an even more archaic sapiential tradition. Hence, rabbinic sages, building on the priestly sensibility, affirmed as well in the deuteronomic stratum of the Pentateuch, maintained a clear-cut social difference between Israel and the Gentiles, even if they readily acknowledged that as a matter of practicality Jews and non-Jews share the same living space; in broad strokes, I accept that the principal taxonomic indicator of the former—what distinguishes Jew from non-Jew—is circumcision, and that of the latter idolatry.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ One thinks, for instance, of the description of Israel as the firstborn of God (Exod. 22: 28) or simply as 'sons of God' as alternate ways of articulating the notion of being chosen, the treasured people, *am segullah* (Deut. 14: 1–2). See Levenson, *Death*, 36–42. For a noble attempt to articulate ethnocentric elements in the crafting of biblical monotheism, see Schwartz, *Curse of Cain*. See also Lüdemann, *Unholy*, 33–75; Shemesh, 'Origins'; Schiffman, 'Non-Jews'; and the instructive analysis of the polarity between Israelite and alien in Olyan, *Rites*, 63–102. See also Feldman, 'Remember Amalek!'

⁴⁷ Harvey, *True Israel*, 259–60. See also Smith, 'Fences', repr. in id., *Imagining Religion*, 1–18; Collins, 'Symbol'; Neusner, *Handbook*, 145–63; Cohen, *Why Aren't Jewish Women Circumcised?*, pp. xi–xii, 8–18, 53–4, 70–2, 75–6, 82. Also relevant here is the suggestion in Eilberg-Schwartz, *Human Will*, 103–8, that the rabbinic conception of human agency, at least as it is reflected in the mishnaic code, is a synthesis of the two accounts of creation preserved in the opening chapters of Genesis, ascribed in standard form-critical scholarship respectively to P and J. Especially important is Eilberg-Schwartz's claim that the priestly version anticipates the rabbinic notion of 'classification as instrumental in determining the character of the world' (p. 103).

As I suspect there would be less controversy generated by the latter, I will focus briefly on the former.

Explicit affirmation of circumcision as the identity marker is somewhat muted in rabbinic sources, and there is obviously room for many well-nuanced and better-focused individual studies, but I would contend that a general picture is still valid. All things considered, the Jewish woman's identity, rabbinically conceived, is determined by her domestic responsibilities and avoidance of all things prohibited by the law, but that she is only bound by a select number of things prescribed by the law.⁴⁸ The covenant of circumcision—almost the mirror opposite of what we find in Paul's discussions on the matter—emerges as the seal of identity, the covenantal mark on the flesh everlastingly and hence repeatedly inscribed on the male Jewish politic from generation to generation, embodying the spring of expectation and hope of renewal. From rabbinic dicta, the Oral Torah woven by the threads of the written, we can elicit the view that to be circumcised is the distinctive mark of being a Jew, and that this mark, moreover, is tied to the angelic nature of Israel, that is, by virtue of circumcision the Jewish boy is initiated into the people that is holy, separate from others. I suspect that this way of thinking also underlies the association in some rabbinic texts of the priestly notion of the divine image in whose likeness Adam was created and circumcision. The logic of the mythopoesis leads to the conclusion that Adam must have been born circumcised since he was created in God's image.⁴⁹

Here it is of interest to recall that, according to Jubilees 15: 27, the rite of circumcision endows Jewish men with an angelic status that enables them to stand in the presence of God and his holy retinue.⁵⁰ The angelomorphic

⁴⁸ For an interesting feminist reading of the key talmudic source that determined the status of women in terms of rabbinic law, see Millen, 'Analysis'. On the exemption of women from time-bound positive commandments, see also Wegner, *Chattel*, 152; Hoffman, *Covenant*, 164–5; Margalit, 'Priestly Men'.

⁴⁹ The point is stated explicitly in the list of individuals born circumcised in *Avot de-Rabbi Natan*, version A, ch. 2, p. 12: 'Primal Adam, too, emerged circumcised as it says, "And God created Adam in his image" (Gen. 1:27).' For a later kabbalistic embellishment, see *Tiqqunei Zohar*, § 69, 116b: 'As Adam is from the side of the letter of the covenant (*ot berit*), *yod*, he was born circumcised, as it is written, "she saw that he was good" (Exod. 2: 2), "They say of the righteous (*šaddiq*) that he is good" (Isa. 3: 10), for there is there no shell of the foreskin (*qelippah de-orlah*) whatsoever.' On the rabbinic theme that the unblemished person is born circumcised, viewed especially in light of the Pauline critique of circumcision of the flesh and the Hadrianic ban on circumcision, see Kalimi, *Early Jewish Exegesis*, 59–76. For the development of a similar motif in Islamic tradition with respect to Muḥammad, see Kister, "...And He Was Born Circumcised...".

⁵⁰ Ginzberg, *Legends*, 5: 268, n. 318. It is of relevance to note that, according to the author of Jubilees, angels are instructed to celebrate Sabbath (2: 21, 30) and the feast of Pentecost (6: 18) in the heavenly domain. Perhaps the presumed angelic status of Israel underlies the strict stance the author of Jubilees takes against intermarriage of Jew and Gentile (30: 7–8) even though

nature of Israel is a motif known from other (mostly priestly) sources in this period, though not, to the best of my knowledge, connected so explicitly with circumcision. The depiction of the angels participating in this rite has a twofold implication: first, the ascription of an imaginal body to the angels, and second, the glorification of the corporeal body of the Jewish male. In the main, this concurs with at least one school of thought that may be culled from rabbinic literature, which presumed that circumcision is not only a marker of social identity, but also the means by which the flesh of Israel is ontically transfigured.

Even when it is recognized by rabbinic authorities that other nations perform the rite of circumcision, a distinction is upheld halakhically between Israel, the 'seed of Abraham' (*zera avraham*), and the 'nations of the world' (*ummot ha-olam*). Hence, the mishnaic ruling (transmitted anonymously) that if a Jewish man takes an oath (*qonam*) not to derive pleasure from the 'uncircumcised' (*arelim*), he can derive pleasure from Jews who have not been circumcised (*arlei yisra'el*), for instance, a child whose brother died as a result of complications from being circumcised, but not from Gentiles who have been circumcised (*mulei ha-ummot*).⁵¹ Conversely, if he takes an oath not to derive pleasure from the 'circumcised' (*mulim*), his pledge is binding with respect to uncircumcised Jews (*arlei yisra'el*), but not circumcised Gentiles (*mulei ha-ummot*). It is difficult to contest that the principle underlying these rulings is that circumcision applies most precisely to the Jewish people, and thus we are justified to conclude that the matter is first and foremost a cultural rite endemic to the formation of the 'bodily theocracy' (the term employed by Mary Douglas to denote a closed and purified communal body⁵²) and not a medical operation;⁵³ even if a non-Jew is surgically

the exegetical basis can be found in Gen. 34: 14–17. Concerning this matter, see Werman, 'Jubilees 30'.

⁵¹ Mention should be made here of Jer. 9: 25–6 where the prophet promises that God will exact judgment *al kol mul be-orlah*, which could be rendered literally as 'on every one circumcised with the foreskin', that is, every one circumcised and uncircumcised. In the continuation of the prophet's admonition, the nations (*goyim*) are referred to as 'uncircumcised' (*arelim*), and Israel as 'uncircumcised in the heart' (*arlei lev*). Concerning this passage, see Smith, *Imagining Religion*, 10. On the possibility that circumcision served as a necessary component of Gentile conversion to the teachings of Jesus at the hands of Paul, see Gal. 5 and discussion in Sanders, 'Reflections on Anti-Judaism', 270–1.

⁵² Douglas, *Natural Symbols*, 93–112. I was inspired to make use of this locution by the discussion in Despres, 'Mary of the Eucharist', 375–6.

⁵³ On the rabbinic exclusion of Gentiles from the commandment of circumcision, see Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 59a–b, translated and analysed in Cohen, 'Be Fertile', 148–52. The point I have argued with respect to the rabbinic understanding of circumcision is supported by anthropological studies of the rite of circumcision in other cultural contexts. For instance, see La Fontaine, *Gisu*, 42, cited in Cohen, 'La Fontaine', 213. Still useful is the wide-ranging anthropological account of the Jewish rite of circumcision in Gaster, *Holy*, 45–65.

circumcised, from the rabbinic perspective he is still in the category of the 'uncircumcised' (*arel*), a derogatory term used exclusively for non-Jews.⁵⁴ The bias is articulated explicitly in the dictum *she-ein ha-orlah qeruyah ella le-shem ha-goyim* ('the [term] 'foreskin' applies only to non-Jews'), an opinion anchored exegetically in several verses where the term *arelim* (or the singular *arel*) is applied to non-Israelite nations (1 Sam. 17: 36, 2 Sam. 1: 20, and Jer. 9: 25).⁵⁵

Although not as ubiquitous as in times past, there persists a lingering sense that the religious philosophy crafted by rabbinic figures in the so-called talmudic period, that is, from the first to the seventh centuries CE, primarily in Palestine and Babylonia, articulates a more universalistic attitude, seeking to promote in its idealized constructions the welfare of humanity at large and not focused exclusively on the destiny of Israel.⁵⁶ André LaCocque offers a

⁵⁴ On the metonymic depiction of Jews as 'circumcised' and non-Jews as 'foreskinned', see Cohen, 'Judaism without Circumcision', 404–7; id., *Why Aren't Jewish Women Circumcised?*, 53–4, 94–5, 98. The innately impure state of the non-Jew and the rejection of surgical circumcision is reflected in the rabbinic halakhah that requires of a circumcised Gentile who wishes to convert to Judaism that a drop of blood be drawn from his penis, that is, there must be a ritual act of circumcision to bring the convert into the covenantal fold of Judaism. See Cohen, *Beginnings*, 226–7. It is possible that a polemic against non-Israelite circumcision is hinted at in the ruling in Mishnah, Shabbat 19: 6, *mal we-lo para et ha-milah ke-illu lo mal*, 'the one who cuts [the foreskin] but does not uncover [the corona by removing the membrane], it is as if he has not cut', that is, the Jewish rite of circumcision, as interpreted rabbinically, requires *milah* and *peri'ah*. On the subsidiary status of the latter, consider the statement (attributed to Rav) in Babylonian Talmud, Yevamot 71b that *peri'ah* was not originally given to Abraham but was instituted later by Joshua. Schürer, *History*, 1: 149, n. 28, suggests that the rabbis introduced *peri'ah* during the Hadrianic persecution to offset the practice of *epispasm*, that is, removing the sign of circumcision. Concerning *peri'ah*, see also Rubín, 'Stretching'; Cohen, *Beginnings*, 225. See also Cohen, 'Between Judaism and Christianity', 307–11; id., *Why Aren't Jewish Women Circumcised?*, 25–6, 28, 156–7. The act of *peri'ah* is also one of the factors that distinguishes Jewish and Muslim circumcision; see Ch. 2, n. 134.

⁵⁵ Mishnah, Nedarim 3: 11. It is of relevance to consider the language of Col. 2: 13 against this background.

⁵⁶ On the universalizing tendencies in biblical and rabbinic sources, see Bloch, *Israel and the Nations*; Greenberg, 'Mankind'; id., 'Biblical Grounding'; Spero, *Morality*; Cohn, *Human Rights*; Levenson, 'Universal Horizon'; Falk, *Religious Law*. See also Loewe, 'Potentialities and Limitations', 115–50, and Saldarini and Kanofsky, 'Religious Dimensions'. While the authors duly note that Israel has a special place in the human community in virtue of its relationship to God (pp. 103–4), they fall short of marking the extent to which scriptural expressions of chosenness were used as textual support for an intolerant orientation vis-à-vis other nations of the world, and thus they consistently (and, in my judgement, misleadingly) use rabbinic sources to adduce opinions about the 'human condition' in general. For another attempt at a universalistic understanding of rabbinic Judaism, with special emphasis on halakhah, see Novak, *Natural Law and Covenantal Rights*. While none of these studies presents a completely distorted or falsified portrait of Judaism, their picture is only partial. One can surely understand the desire (especially in the case of Bloch) to combat an anti-Semitic stereotype of parochial Judaism and its negative attitude towards the Gentile, but the scholarly task requires a balanced assessment that takes into account both the laudable and reprehensible. Wyschogrod, *Body of Faith*, 68,

typical formulation of this view: ‘Rabbinic Judaism’s tendency is to the universal, that is, intellectually to the ethical and collectively to the social.’⁵⁷ To be sure, some aspects of rabbinic jurisprudence support this characterization, and, in any event, it is rather meaningless to consider the entity Israel in isolation from other nations or ethnicities, usually troped in rabbinic texts as the ‘seventy nations of the world’, but the situation is far more complex, as many passages indicate that an impressive number of rabbis—not only quantitatively but in terms of stature—adopted a far more parochial propensity and prejudicial outlook.⁵⁸ One scholar goes so far as to say, ‘the rabbinic image of the non-Jew is xenophobic in the extreme’.⁵⁹ Pragmatically, Jews in and outside the land of Palestine were likely to have had positive interactions with non-Jews, but the process of cultural self-identification shaped by rabbinic exegetes in the course of time was fostered by promulgating the stereotypical portrait of the non-Jew as an inferior and in some contexts intrinsically wicked being.⁶⁰ Consider, for example, the blunt interpretive gloss on one of the three blessings that, according to R. Judah, the Jewish male is required to utter each day (a formula that is still part of the traditional liturgy): ‘Blessed are you for not making me a Gentile’ (*barukh she-lo asani goy*), ‘For the Gentiles do not amount to anything (*she-ein ha-goyim kelum*) [as it is written], ‘All the nations are nothing in relation to him’ (Isa. 40: 17).’⁶¹ The biblical notion of the covenantal election of the Israelite people as

concludes that God’s election and sanctification of Israel signifies his love for all humanity. This is not borne out by many passages in rabbinic literature through the ages. For a more even-handed view that sees Jewish ethics as a conflict between contextualism and essentialism, see Biderman, ‘Jewish Ethics’.

⁵⁷ LaCocque and Ricoeur, *Thinking Biblically*, 97.

⁵⁸ On this note, it is instructive to consider the observation of Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, § 136, p. 188, that the Jews ‘feel they are the chosen people among all the nations because they are the moral genius among the nations (because they had a *more profound contempt* for the human being in themselves than any other people)’. Israel’s chosenness is thus proportionate to its contempt for the condition of humankind.

⁵⁹ Stern, *Jewish Identity*, 4. For an unusually candid critique of the rabbinic attitude toward Gentiles, see Shapiro, *Between the Yeshivah*, 49–50, 182–3.

⁶⁰ Stern, *Jewish Identity*, 5–6, 22–30. A typical expression of rabbinic ethnocentrism is found in the following comment in *Midrash Tehillim*, 118: 2, p. 481: ‘On Rosh ha-Shanah everyone stands in judgement before the holy One, blessed be he, and each and every nation says “We are innocent.” On Yom Kippur the holy One, blessed be he, comes and exonerates Israel and forgives their sins, as it says, “On that day atonement will be made for you” (Lev. 16: 30).’ See as well *Pesiqta de-Rav Kahana*, 27: 2, pp. 406–7. The author of this tradition wanted to have it both ways, that is, the High Holy Days are depicted as a time of judgement for all nations, but only the people of Israel are acquitted.

⁶¹ Palestinian Talmud, *Berakhot* 9: 1, ed. Venice, 12b. The utter worthlessness of the other nations is expressed in similar language in 4 Ezra 6: 55–9, a passage that resonates with several other critical rabbinic motifs. See as well the so-called ‘Word of the Luminaries’, 4Q504, Frgs. 1–2, col. 3, in *Dead Sea Scrolls*, 2: 1014–15.

the 'treasured possession', 'holy nation', and 'kingdom of priests' (Exod. 19: 5–6),⁶² their identification as God's favoured portion from amongst the nations (Deut. 32: 8–9), the even more striking depiction of them as the 'firstborn' of God (Exod. 4: 22),⁶³ and the sense of chosenness that is related to God's special love for the 'seed of Abraham' (Isa. 41: 8), provide the textual bases necessary for beginning to consider the chauvinistic attitude expressed in the statement attributed to R. Judah. So unworthy are non-Jews that no specific reason for their unworthiness need be given.⁶⁴ They are simply inconsequential, literally, 'not a thing' (*ein kelum*) in relation to God.⁶⁵

Such extreme disavowal of the worth of non-Jews is not necessarily the normative, or even majority, rabbinic opinion; but it was articulated and preserved in classical rabbinic literature, and thus had an impact on the formation of anthropological attitudes in subsequent generations.⁶⁶ I would

⁶² For discussion of this complex notion that has informed Jewish attitudes through the generations, see Novak, *Election of Israel*.

⁶³ The description of Israel as the firstborn of God has to be seen in the larger metaphorical context according to which Israel is depicted as the son in relation to God the father. This theme was greatly expanded in late Second Temple-period texts that ascribe to the Jewish people the identification mark 'sons of God', an attribution that connotes (at least in some passages) the angelic status of Israel, which, interestingly, is expressed in some sources in terms of the special divine providence allocated to Israel in contrast to other nations who are ruled by angelic intermediaries. For discussion of the relevant scriptural verses where this theme occurs and its metamorphosis in later texts, see Byrne, 'Sons of God', 9–70. See also Kugel, '4Q369', 122–37. Particularly relevant to the cluster of rabbinic themes that I have delineated is 4 Ezra 6: 55–9. In that context, the people of Israel are identified as the 'firstborn, only begotten' child of God in contrast to the other nations that descended from Adam, who are described as 'nothing . . . like spittle . . . a drop from a bucket'. In addition, Israel is depicted as the reason why God created the world, a theme that becomes paramount in later rabbinic texts (see below n. 244). On the debate regarding the possible messianic application of this scriptural locution in the Dead Sea fragments, see Evans, 'Note', and references to studies of Collins and Fitzmyer cited on p. 185, n. 3.

⁶⁴ An echo of the wording of the talmudic passage is discernible in the sharp language of the gloss of Abraham ben David of Posquières to Moses Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Avot ha-Ṭume'ot, 2: 10. Rabad rejects the view of Maimonides that the ruling that the animal slaughtered by an idolater is considered to be a corpse, rendering impure what comes into contact with it, is rabbinic in origin on the grounds that 'those who worship the stars are like beasts, and they do not become impure nor do they render others impure. The Gentiles (*goyim*) are the nation that is compared to an ass, "as a drop in the bucket" (Isa. 40:15), and "they all shall be borne by the wind" (Isa. 57: 13), and whoever thinks of them as something (*ha-ḥoshev otam li-khelum*) "has gathered up the wind in the hollow of his hand" (Prov. 30: 4)'.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ The language of discrediting the being of non-Jews vis-à-vis Israel is probably based, at least in part, on the apocalyptic image in Obad. 1: 16: 'As you drank on my holy mount, the nations shall drink constantly; they shall drink and grow weary, they will be as if they were not (*we-hayu kelo hayu*).'

⁶⁶ An example of this is found in the prayer *Aleynu le-Shabbeah*, which originated in the talmudic period and is still recited in many Jewish congregations on a daily basis and featured in the High Holiday liturgy. In this prayer, Jews give praise to God 'for not making us like the nations of the lands, for not placing us amongst the families of the earth, for not allocating our portion with them nor our fate in all of their masses'. In the continuation of the prayer

say in this regard that the pietism cultivated by the rabbis is still very much reflective of the religious sensibilities of the Israelite priesthood, and especially the group whose literary imaginings have been preserved, albeit in a mostly fragmentary way, in the Qumran scrolls.⁶⁷ To be sure, there are the obvious sociological differences; for all intents and purposes, it seems reasonable to say that the ‘community of the sons of light’ (*yaḥad benei or*), also designated as the ‘sons of the high priest Zadok’ (*benei kohen gadol ṣadoq*), was an esoteric sect, an elite group of priests seeking to establish a priestly regimen after having rejected the main institution of priestly power, the Jerusalem temple, whereas the rabbinic sages, living for the most part after the destruction of the ritual centre of Jewish observance, were immersed in the project of constructing an edifice based on three pillars, Torah-study, liturgical practice, and charitable deeds. For all that, the social understanding of belonging or entering the community as approximating the purity of the sanctuary (*ṭaharat ha-miḡdash*), an ideal of holiness tied to the place of congregation of the liturgical fraternity⁶⁸—in the twofold sense of study and prayer, what later rabbis deemed *avodah*, worship or labour⁶⁹—is not so dissimilar at least as it relates to the question of identity and models of exemplary behaviour that fostered a rigid distinction between Jew and Gentile and an emerging sense of intolerance vis-à-vis the other.⁷⁰

(according to the oldest textual witnesses still preserved in many prayer-books), the God of Jewish worship is contrasted with the false gods of the nations. What meaning can this prayer have when it is uttered in a synagogue in the twenty-first century in North America, and how does it impact the ethical sensibility of the worshipper? On the background of this prayer, see Swartz, ‘*Alay le-Shabbeah!*’.

⁶⁷ See Harrington, ‘Interpreting Leviticus’, id., ‘Rabbinic Reception’; Werman, ‘Concept of Holiness’.

⁶⁸ See Harrington, ‘Holiness and Law’; id., ‘Holiness in the Laws’. The bibliography on the topic of entering into the community is immense, and thus I will refer here simply to the succinct philological and conceptual summary of the point offered by Qimron and Strugnell, *Qumran Cave 4, V*, 88–9.

⁶⁹ The sectarians who established the community at Qumran did not attempt to institute sacrifices, believing that this was a rite that could be performed only in the precincts of the Jerusalem temple. In place of sacrifices, they cultivated purity laws and established communal prayer and study of Torah as the principal acts of pious worship. Many scholars have emphasized this character of the sectarian worldview. For a lucid articulation of the matter and substantial bibliography of other relevant studies, see Schiffman, ‘Community Without Temple’. The emphasis accorded prayer and study as the primary means to dwell in the presence of God in the sectarian literature and the orientation articulated in rabbinic literature should be self-evident.

⁷⁰ See Mach, ‘Conservative Revolution’. Also relevant to this symbolic complex is the subtle analysis of the application of temple imagery to the figure of Jesus in the period of Christian origins and the consequent expansion of spatio-temporal and ethnocentric boundaries in Chance, *Jerusalem*. For an alternative account, see Brawley, *Luke-Acts*, 107–32.

According to one astonishing mishnaic text, Jews are warned not to leave their cattle in the inns of the heathen nations (*goyim*) for they are suspected of copulating with animals, not to allow a Jewish woman to be left alone with them for they are suspected of engaging in illicit sexual relations,⁷¹ and not to allow a Jewish man⁷² to be alone with them for they are suspected of murder.⁷³ One would be hard-pressed not to discern an underlying misanthropic attitude towards non-Jews in this rabbinic ruling. According to another passage, which is an interpretation of Ezekiel 33: 25–6, Gentiles generically are said to be guilty of eating a limb from a living animal, idolatry, murder, theft, homosexuality, and illicit sexual relations.⁷⁴ According to another early halakhic ruling, a Jew is permitted to enter and exit freely the courtyard of a non-Jew for it is compared to a barn of animals (*dir shel behemah*), whereas no such permission is given with respect to a courtyard of a Jew since it is considered to be his private property.⁷⁵ Thus we see that the comparison of non-Jews to beasts has legal ramifications and is not simply rhetorical banter.

An additional illustration of the extreme dismissal of the value of non-Jews on the part of the rabbis is found in the comparison (based on scriptural precedent) of the nations of the world to worthless and disposable straw (Exod. 16: 7, Obad. 1: 18), thorns (Isa. 33: 12), and stubble (Job 21: 18), in contrast to Israel, which is depicted as the valuable and usable wheat (Song 7: 3).⁷⁶ Rabbinic interpreters used this contrast in order to explain the recurring biblical references to the enumeration of the people of Israel. In one redactional setting, a dictum of R. Isaac, which is reported by R. Ḥoniyah, echoes the sentiment expressed in the aforementioned comment of R. Judah in even starker and more caustic terms: the owner of a house does not pay attention to baskets of rubbish, straw, stubble, or chaff. Why? Because they are not considered as anything. Similarly, God does not pay attention to the nations of the world, for they are not anything (*she-einan kelum*), as it says, ‘All the nations are nothing in relation to him’ (Isa. 40: 17). To whom does he pay attention? Israel, as it says, ‘When you take a census of the Israelite people’ (Exod. 30: 12), ‘Take a census of the whole Israelite community’

⁷¹ On the negative portrayal of the Gentile other in rabbinic texts in terms of sexual offenses and licentiousness, see Satlow, *Tasting*, 146–53, 203–6.

⁷² The term that I have translated as ‘Jewish man’ is *adam*, a rendering that is clearly justified by the context since Jews are here contrasted with non-Jews.

⁷³ Mishnah, Avodah Zarah 2: 1. It is of interest to consider in light of this older rabbinic teaching the following prophetic ḥadith in the Islamic tradition, cited in McAuliffe, *Qur’anic Christians*, 220: ‘No two Jews can be alone with a Muslim except with intent to kill.’

⁷⁴ Tosefta, Soṭah 6: 9.

⁷⁵ Tosefta, Eruvin 8: 1.

⁷⁶ *Pesiṣta Rabbati*, 10: 10, p. 128.

(Num. 1: 2).⁷⁷ The Jews alone are worthy of being counted for they are intrinsically precious; the other nations are no more valuable than piles of refuse. This discrepancy is employed in another midrashic text to explain the priestly decree, ‘Record every first-born male of the Israelite people from the age of one month up, and make a list of their names’ (Num. 3: 40). Just as a person does not fastidiously keep track of his glassware, but he knows precisely the number of pearls that he owns, so God has no concern for the non-Jewish nations (*goyim*) for they ‘are nothing in relation to him’ (Isa. 40: 17), but he must enumerate each first-born male Jew as they are the human beings (*benei adam*) ‘who have been carried since birth, supported since leaving the womb’ (Isa. 46: 3).⁷⁸ Significantly, the designation ‘human’ is here applied exclusively to the Jews, a critical theme to which I shall return at a later stage in this analysis.

The comparison of Israel to a ‘treasured possession’ (*segullah*) guarantees their favoured status amongst the nations:

R. Joshua of Sikhnin said in the name of R. Levi, Israel are called the treasured possession of the holy One, blessed be he, as it is written, ‘you shall be my treasured possession’ (Exod. 19: 5). . . . Just as the treasured possession is more cherished by a person than everything else he possesses, so Israel is more cherished before the holy One, blessed be he, than all the nations, as it says, ‘the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth’ (Deut. 28: 1), and it says ‘you shall be blessed above all other peoples’ (Deut. 7: 14).⁷⁹

In still other rabbinic texts, a more definitive contrast is drawn between the intrinsic purity of Israel and the impurity of the nations,⁸⁰ an orientation epitomized in the midrashic explanation of the biblical designation of Israel as the ‘holy nation’, *goy qadosh* (Exod. 19: 6): “And a nation” (*we-goy*): They are called a “nation” (*goy*) as it says “And who is like your people Israel, a unique nation (*goy ehad*) on earth etc.” (2 Sam. 7: 23). “Holy” (*qadosh*): They are holy (*qedoshim*) and consecrated (*mequddashim*), separated (*perushim*) from the nations of the world and from their abominations.⁸¹ The sharp distinction between Jew and non-Jew is reflected as well in the remark addressed by God to Israel,

⁷⁷ *Song of Songs Rabbah* 7: 8, p. 156.

⁷⁸ *Midrash Tanhuma*, Bemidbar, 20.

⁷⁹ *Pesiqta Rabbati*, 11: 26, p. 170.

⁸⁰ Stern, *Jewish Identity*, 31–2. For recent discussion of the concepts of purity and impurity in terms of the question of identity and otherness, see Hayes, *Gentile Impurities*.

⁸¹ *Mekhilta*, Baḥodesh, ch. 2, p. 209. On the political, cultural, and theological ramifications of the demarcation of Israel as a ‘holy people’, see Harrington, *Holiness*, 161–201.

In this world I abhor all the idolaters for they are from the seed of impurity (*zera tum'ah*), but I chose you, for you are the seed of truth (*zera emet*), as it says 'I planted you with noble vines, entirely the seed of truth' (Jer. 2: 21), and it is written 'The Lord God chose you from among all other peoples on earth to be his treasured people' (Deut. 14: 2). Even in the future I will choose only you, for you are the seed of holiness (*zera qedushshah*), blessed by the Lord, as it says 'They shall not toil to no purpose, they shall not bear children in vain, for they shall be a seed blessed by the Lord' (Isa. 65: 23).⁸²

The exclusivist orientation cultivated within rabbinic academies can be traced to a reactionary tendency—shaped by the blending of priestly and deuteronomistic language—that took root in the more extreme pietistic groups from the late Second Temple period as a response to the influence of external cultural forces.⁸³ Thus, for example, the author of Jubilees recounts the scriptural narrative about the birth of Isaac to Sarah and Abraham by noting that from the progeny of the latter many nations would arise (Gen. 21: 12), but only the sons of Isaac 'would become a holy nation and he would not be counted with the nations because he would become the portion of the Most High and all his seed would fall (by lot) into that which God will rule so that he might become a people (belonging) to the Lord, a (special) possession from all people, and so that he might become a kingdom of priests and a holy people' (Jub. 16: 7–8).⁸⁴ The xenophobic slant of this author's interpretation of the priestly and deuteronomistic conceptions of Israel's holiness and election is in evidence in another passage, where Abraham reportedly says to Isaac in his farewell testimony that all the deeds of humankind are 'sins and evils; and all of their deeds are defilement and corruption and contamination; and there is no righteousness with them' (21: 21). Isaac is thus impelled to turn aside from the impure ways of the nations and to follow the commandments of God. In a third passage, where the author imagines Abraham blessing his grandson Jacob, the demand for Israel to renew the covenant and realize its destiny as a holy people by separating from the 'contaminated', 'despicable', and 'abominable' ways of the idolatrous Gentiles is reiterated (22: 15–23).⁸⁵ More specifically, Jacob, a cipher for the Jewish people in the

⁸² *Midrash Tanhuma*, Naso, 7.

⁸³ In spite of the considerable influence of foreign ideas on Jubilees, a relentless aversion towards non-Jews is advocated. See Patte, *Early Jewish Hermeneutic*, 154–6.

⁸⁴ On the recounting of Abraham's farewell testimony to Ishmael, Isaac, and their respective progeny, and the eventual separation of the two, see Jubilees 20: 1–13. On the distinctiveness of the Jewish people, see Abraham's blessing of Jacob in 22: 10. The destiny of the Jews to be the holy people is repeated several other times in this composition. See 22: 29, 25: 3, 12, 18; 33: 20; 50: 9. On the promise to Israel to rule over all the nations, see 32: 18–19.

⁸⁵ In that context, the exhortation to avoid intermarriage is first limited to the daughters of Canaan, but the rhetoric quickly expands so that the author generalizes from the specific case of

time of the text's composition, are commanded to avoid eating with non-Jews, imitating their ways, and becoming their associates, which I assume implies forming business alliances.

The Stoically oriented rabbinic model of ascetic scholasticism⁸⁶ is, in great measure, an interpretative reinscription of this priestly scribal ideal.⁸⁷ According to one rabbinic passage, the selection of Jews from amongst the nations is related exegetically to the first word of the Decalogue, *anokhi* (Exod. 20: 2): 'Alef is the holy One, blessed be he, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one" (Deut. 6: 5); nun is fifty and kaf is twenty, and these are the seventy ethnicities⁸⁸ that the holy One, blessed be he, created in his world; yod is ten, and these are the ten⁸⁹ and from them he chose only Israel.'⁹⁰ In the language of another, very daring homily, the holiness of Israel entails cleaving to God in this world and becoming a fiery being like God in the world-to-come.⁹¹ Going beyond other rabbis who affirmed the eschatological angelification of Israel, the author of this text embraced the notion that Jews who were conjoined to God in this world would be transformed into divine fire in the next world.

On occasion Israel's holiness is related more specifically to the observance of the ritual commandments (*mišvot*), a theme accentuated in various currents of medieval rabbinic culture.⁹² In some rabbinic passages, reflecting an older apocalyptic sentiment, the distinctive potentiality for holiness on the part of Jews is expressed as a homology between the community of Israel and the hosts of angels that surround the throne of glory in its heavenly

the Canaanites to idolaters in general (Jubilees 22: 20–2). On the prohibition of Israelite men marrying Canaanite women, see 25: 1, 4–10; 30: 7–17 (above, n. 50). The need to preserve the inherent holiness of the Jewish people is highlighted similarly in the rabbinic aversion to sexual relations between Jews and Gentiles, particularly between Jewish men and Gentile women. See Satlow, *Tasting*, 83–118.

⁸⁶ See Fischel, *Rabbinic Literature*, 93–4.

⁸⁷ On this score, it is of interest to consider the brief but evocative study by Martone, 'Qumran and Stoicism'.

⁸⁸ *Iyotantiyot* or, according to some manuscripts, *otantiyot*, which is clearly a corruption of the Greek *ethnos*. See variants cited in *Pesiqta Rabbati*, 21: 29, pp. 468–9.

⁸⁹ In *Pesiqta Rabbati*, ed. Friedmann, 21, 105a, the editor adds in brackets *dorot*, which should be translated as 'generations'. This reading is not in the first edition nor is it attested in the other manuscripts utilized by Ulmer in her edition of *Pesiqta Rabbati* (see previous note). The three manuscripts all read 'yod is ten, and these are Israel, and from all of them he chose only Israel'. A credible explanation of the word 'generations' is offered in *Pesikta Rabbati: Discourses for Feasts*, 433, n. 68: Abraham, the first patriarch of Israel, represents the tenth generation from Adam. Braude refers to *Genesis Rabbah* 63: 3, p. 680, where the name 'Israel' is attributed to all three patriarchs.

⁹⁰ *Pesiqta Rabbati*, 21: 29, p. 468.

⁹¹ *Ibid.* 11: 27, p. 171.

⁹² *Midrash Tanḥuma*, Shelah, 15; *Numbers Rabbah* 17: 6. For citation and analysis of other texts that articulate this viewpoint, see Urbach, *Sages*, 367–9. See also Stern, *Jewish Identity*, 32, 71–9.

abode.⁹³ The Jewish people may be considered an angelic race—in the words of the twelfth-century Andalusian poet Moses Ibn Ezra, Israel is called (on the basis of the locution describing the angels in Ps. 82: 1) the ‘congregation of the divine’, *we-yisra’el adat ha-el*⁹⁴—for they have the capacity to become like angels in the service of God through prayer, study, and good deeds, to live a more subtle form of embodiment.⁹⁵ One of the more dramatic ways in which the correspondence between Jews and celestial beings is expressed is in terms of the synchronicity of their liturgical worship. According to some texts, the utterance of the Sanctus (*qedushshah*) by Israel below is concurrent with the utterance of the Sanctus by the angels above, an idea attested in synagogue liturgy from Late Antiquity (informative as well of early Christian liturgy⁹⁶), and ancient and medieval Jewish mysticism.⁹⁷ According to other passages, perhaps older than the former, the analogy is set up between the recitation of the *Shema*⁹⁸ on the part of Jews and the utterance of the Sanctus by the angels. In many of these passages, the worship of Israel is depicted as superior to the singing of the angels and more desirable in the eyes of God.⁹⁹ Indeed, we may not be far off the mark by describing the rabbinic attitude as affirming the

⁹³ Babylonian Talmud, Qiddushin 70a; *Exodus Rabbah* 15: 6; *Pirquei Rabbi Eli’ezer*, ch. 22, 51a; Stern, *Jewish Identity*, 40–1. The angelic status of Israel affirmed by the rabbis may have been based on the portrayal of the righteous as angels in apocalyptic and sectarian literature. See Charlesworth, ‘Portrayal’; Dimant, ‘Men as Angels’; Smelik, ‘On Mystical Transformation’; Bock, *Blasphemy*, 113–83; Steinberg, ‘Angelic Israel’. On the development of the idea of angelomorphic communities within Israel in the Second Temple period, see Fletcher-Louis, *Luke-Acts*, 184–205; id., *All the Glory*.

⁹⁴ Moses Ibn Ezra, *Collected Liturgical Poetry*, 128.

⁹⁵ See e.g. *Midrash Mishle*, 8, p. 58, commenting on the verse ‘O men (*ishim*) I will call unto you; my voice to all humanity (*benei adam*)’ (Prov. 8: 4): ‘If you are meritorious and you fulfill the words of Torah, you will be called *ishim* like the ministering angels, and if not you are *benei adam*.’ In this context, *adam* denotes a lower level of attainment that is distinguished from the angelic classification *ishim* (see Dan. 9: 21, where the angel Gabriel is referred to as *ha-ish gavri’el*, as noted by Visotzky, in *ibid.* 58, n. 13). On occasion the Jewish people are portrayed as even greater than angels. See e.g. *Tanna de-vei Eliyahu*, ch. 21, p. 116: ‘Israel are greater than the ministering angels; they are greater in words of Torah; they are greater than all the inhabitants of the world and than all the acts of his hands that he created in the world.’

⁹⁶ Spinks, *Sanctus*, 25–45.

⁹⁷ See Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy*, 54–62; Altmann, ‘Hymns of Sanctification’; Heinemann, *Iyyunei Tefillah*, 12–21; Gruenwald, *From Apocalypticism*, 145–73; Swartz, *Mystical Prayer*, 16–17, 127–30; Mach, *Entwicklungsstadien*, 222–8; Chazon, ‘Qedushah Liturgy’. As Fleischer, ‘Qedusha of the *Amida*’, 306, n. 28, points out, some forms of the *qedushshah* relate the sanctification of God’s glory on the part of Israel to the angelic hymning above and some present it independently.

⁹⁸ This is the portion of the traditional liturgy, centered on the proclamation of Deut. 6: 4, that affirms the core tenet of monotheism.

⁹⁹ Babylonian Talmud, *Hullin* 91b; *Genesis Rabbah* 65: 21, p. 739; *Sifre on Deuteronomy*, § 306, p. 343; *Midrash Tanhuma*, Qedoshim, 6; *Seder Eliahu Zuta*, 47 and 56. On God’s preference for the praise of Israel over the praise of the angels (linked exegetically to 2 Sam. 23: 1 and Ps. 22: 4),

Jewish people as the incarnation of God on earth, the full embodiment of the divine image, the physical site of God's indwelling in the mundane.¹⁰⁰

In the mind of some of the ancient rabbinic interpreters, in opposition to angelic Israel stand the inherently impure and idolatrous nations.¹⁰¹ To state the matter starkly, the demonization of non-Jewish nations in kabbalistic texts has much to do with rabbinic xenophobia. Particularly important is the mythologoumenon preserved in rabbinic sources based on the sexual relationship of Eve and the serpent (identified with the angel Samael). An early formulation of this aggadic motif is found in the Pseudo-Jonathan Targum to Genesis 4: 1: 'And Adam knew that his wife Eve was impregnated from Samael, the angel of the Lord.'¹⁰² In the continuation of the targumic text, this impregnation produces the birth of Cain, which parallels the birth of Abel from Adam's seed.¹⁰³ In this particular textual accretion of the tradition, the insemination of Eve by Samael accounts for the birth of Cain rather than for humanity at large. According to the view attributed in some talmudic sources to Rabbi Yoḥanan, the pollution with which the serpent inseminated Eve,

see Palestinian Talmud, Sukkah 5: 4, 55*b*; *Avot de-Rabbi Natan*, version B, ch. 27, p. 55; Ginzberg, *Legends*, 5: 24, n. 66; Fleischer, 'Qedusha of the Amida', 311–12.

¹⁰⁰ See Neusner, *Incarnation*, 192–4; Wyschogrod, *Body of Faith*, 175–7, 211–14; id., 'A Jewish Perspective on Incarnation', 207–8; Wolfson, 'Judaism and Incarnation'. In a measure, the rabbinic attitude is a continuation of what is implied in the diverse strata of the biblical canon. In this matter, we would do well to heed the observation of Cook, 'Old Testament Concept', 90: 'The Old Testament has little concern for what we might call a general anthropology; but when man in general is mentioned, as in the creation account, he is naturally considered in the light of Israel's covenant faith as being in relation to God.'

¹⁰¹ On the suggestion that in rabbinic sources non-Jews are always depicted as calling Jews *yehudim* (reflecting the Greek term *Ioudaioi*) to underscore the fact that the name 'Israel' is deliberately hidden from them, see Stern, *Jewish Identity*, 222–3.

¹⁰² My translation is based on the version of the text in *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*, 5.

¹⁰³ On the midrashic theme of the demonic Cain, see Eichhorn, *Cain*, and the analysis of the image of the 'monstrous Cain' in Western culture in Quinones, *Changes of Cain*, 41–61. The negative stereotype of Cain in biblical narrative is discussed by Schwartz, *Curse of Cain*. On the possibility that the aggadic depiction of Cain may have generated the gnostic myth of the impure seed born from the union of the earthly female and the demiurge, see Stroumsa, *Another Seed*, 45–52. The motif of Cain being born from the serpent's deflowering of Eve may have entered Jewish materials from a Christian source wherein it served as the antitype to Mary's virginal conception of Jesus, as is found, for example, in the Protevangelium of James 13: 1; see Anderson, *Genesis of Perfection*, 89–90. On the symbolic portrayal of Mary as the second Eve in the writings of the Church Fathers, see the useful source material gathered and discussed in *Mary: The Virgin Mary*, 206–22. As one might expect, the portrayals of Cain in rabbinic literature are not only negative. Indeed, there is quite a bit of ambivalence regarding this figure. A positive depiction, for example, relates to the apotropaic interpretation of the mark that God set upon Cain (Gen. 4: 15). See Mellinkoff, *Mark of Cain*, 22–40.

when she and Adam disobeyed the divine command in the Garden of Eden, was removed exclusively from Israel when they stood at Sinai.¹⁰⁴ I do not think we would be far off the mark in saying that the aggadic myth bears affinity to the conception of original sin enunciated in Christian tradition, for the claim it makes is that the ontological status of humanity was changed with the insemination of Eve by the serpent.¹⁰⁵ The antidote to this seminal pollution is Torah, which presently belongs to Israel but whose efficacy will be fully realized in the time of the messiah, when the evil force in the world will be eradicated and non-Jews will be purified in the manner that Jews were purified at Sinai. This apocalyptic vestige, preserved within rabbinic texts, pushes a dualistic conception to its limit without explicitly affirming a metaphysical dualism. In medieval kabbalistic sources the dualistic orientation is carried further (although ultimately not squared with the monistic tendencies of the tradition) and the apocalyptic sensibility revived with daring mythological flare.

¹⁰⁴ Babylonian Talmud, *Yevamot* 103*b*; *Avodah Zarah* 22*b*. In one redactional setting (*Shabbat* 145*b*–146*a*), the converts are signalled out, for even though they were not (as indigenous Jews) present at Sinai, their astral images (the word used is *mazzal*) were, and thus they may be considered to have been purged of the impurity characteristic of the nations of the world. Novak, *Image*, 267–8, suggested that rabbinic and kabbalistic views should be contrasted on grounds that the former constitutes historical reflection and the latter ontological supposition. I am hesitant to accept this distinction for it seems to me that the rabbinic idea expresses the ontological claim in historical terms. For the reverberation of this aggadic motif in *Abulafia*, see below, n. 203.

¹⁰⁵ For a different perspective, see Biale, *Eros*, 45, 246, n. 59; Boyarin, *Carnal Israel*, 82–3. It is of interest to note that in the Paris disputation of 1240 between R. Yehiel and Nicholas Donin, the latter refers to this aggadic theme in support of his argument that Jews themselves affirmed a doctrine of original sin. See Maccoby, *Judaism on Trial*, 51–2. The possibility that some rabbinic figures maintained a doctrine of original sin also emerges from a discussion in Babylonian Talmud, *Shabbat* 55*b*, wherein there is a debate regarding the possibility of death and/or suffering without sin. In that discussion, a baraita (a tannaitic dictum not included in the Mishnah) is cited that states that four people died on account of the serpent and not because of any transgression. Regarding this passage, see Elman, ‘Suffering of the Righteous’, 316, n. 7. On the doctrine of original sin in rabbinic texts, see also Tennant, *Sources*, 145–76. For the development of the motif of the ‘first sin’ (*pesha ri’shon*) in the writings discovered in the Qumran caves, see Sheres and Blau, *Truth*, 31–47. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 154, noted that the kabbalistic notion of the corruption of the world through Adam’s sin may bear the influence of Christian beliefs, although he also acknowledges that there are aggadic passages that express a homologous idea. An interesting appropriation of the Christian doctrine of original sin by a Jewish author is found in Ḥasdai Crescas. The latter espoused this notion in his main philosophical work, *Or ha-Shem*, while rejecting it in his polemical treatise against Christianity, *Biṭṭul Iqqarei ha-Noṣrim*. See Lasker, ‘Original Sin’; id., ‘Impact’, 178–80.

ETHNOCENTRIC INTERPRETATION OF ADAM

The portrayal of Jews vis-à-vis other nations in kabbalistic literature was enhanced by the claim found in a number of rabbinic texts that the term *adam*, which denotes humanity in its fullest sense, applies only to Israel and not to the idolatrous nations. The rabbinic attitude fits a widespread ethnographic pattern related to the semantic need of a given society to demarcate itself as culturally superior to the other. As Rodney Needham observed, 'it is a frequent report from different parts of the world that tribes call themselves alone by the arrogant title 'man,' and that they refer to neighboring peoples as monkeys or crocodiles or malign spirits'.¹⁰⁶

According to select passages in the Babylonian Talmud, non-Jews are excluded from a number of halakhic rulings on the basis of this philological assertion, which is supported exegetically by a gloss on the verse, 'For you, my flock, that I tend are men' (Ezek. 34: 31): 'You are called men, but the idolaters are not called men.'¹⁰⁷ Other passages in the classical rabbinic corpus attest that the exclusive attribution of the term *adam* to Israel was expanded beyond

¹⁰⁶ Needham, *Primordial Characters*, 5, cited by Green, 'Otherness Within', 49.

¹⁰⁷ Babylonian Talmud, *Yevamot* 61a; *Bava Meši'a* 114b; *Keritot* 6b; *Sanhedrin* 72b; Stern, *Jewish Identity*, 39–40. The exclusion of non-Jews from the category of human (*adam*) was not the only opinion expressed in rabbinic literature, a point already noted by Loewe, 'Potentialities and Limitations', 127. Consider, for example, the dictum transmitted in the name of Aqiva in Mishnah, *Avot* 3: 14: 'Beloved is man (*adam*) for he was created with the image. . . . Beloved are Israel for they are called children of God.' In this context, *adam* refers to humanity in general, which is contrasted with Israel. To be sure, even in this passage, the supremacy of Israel is affirmed—they are not only created in the image of God like other human beings, but they are God's children. Nevertheless, the term *adam* denotes all of humanity. See as well the teaching attributed to R. Meir in Babylonian Talmud, *Bava Qama* 38a (parallel in *Avodah Zarah* 3a; *Sanhedrin* 59a): 'Whence do we know that even a Gentile who is engaged in Torah is comparable to a high priest? It is derived from "[You shall keep my laws and my rules] that a man shall fulfil and live by them" (Lev. 18: 5). It does not say Priests, Levites, and Israelites, but man (*adam*). Thus you learn that even a Gentile who is engaged in Torah is considered a high priest.' Here, the term *adam* refers to humanity in general and not specifically to the Jewish people. Mention should be made of the fact that in the redactional setting of *Sanhedrin* 59a, Meir's dictum is set in opposition to the statement of Yoḥanan that a non-Jew who studies Torah merits the punishment of death. The juxtaposition of these antithetical positions should give pause to any scholar who attempts to portray the rabbinic attitude towards non-Jews monolithically. The inconsistency of the rabbis on this point was duly noted by Smith, 'On the Shape of God', 320–6. In the medieval talmudic commentary *Tosafot*, *Avodah Zarah* 3a, s.v., *kohanim*, the apparent clash between Meir's dictum and the teaching attributed to Simeon ben Yoḥai, which limits the use of *adam* exclusively to the Jews, is resolved in the name of Rabbenu Tam who distinguished between the expressions *adam*, which can refer to non-Jews, and *ha-adam* (the noun with the definite article, 'the man'), which refers only to the Jews. See also *Tosafot* to *Yevamot* 61a, s.v., *we-ein ha-ovdei kokhavim*; *Bava Qama* 38a, s.v., *ela adam*; and *Sanhedrin* 59a, s.v., *ela ha-adam*.

the specific issue of ritual purity.¹⁰⁸ According to some texts, the exegetical presumption is that Adam, the progenitor of the human species, is to be identified somatically and semiotically as a Jew. To cite one poignant example: ‘Therefore, Adam was called in the singular, to teach you that whoever destroys one soul from Israel, Scripture considers it as if he destroyed an entire world.’¹⁰⁹ The form of the name *adam* is here used to underscore the ultimate significance and inestimable value of each member of the Jewish body politic, for to murder one Jew is equivalent to demolishing the world. The implication of this dictum, which makes no mention of the other nations, is surely that the Jew has a unique importance in cosmic history. Underlying the philological identification of *adam* and *yisra’el* is the presumption that Jews alone possess the human soul (*nefesh adam*) in its ideal or pristine sense and hence they are differentiated ontologically from other nations.¹¹⁰ The contrast between Israel and the nations, therefore, is not simply a matter of variety in the socio-cultural nurturing, but an essential difference of nature.

The ontological divergence is expressed in striking terms in the following statement attributed to R. Bun: ‘The holy One, blessed be he, said: I have established prophets in Israel, for they are called men (*adam*), as it says, ‘for you are men’ (Ezek. 34: 31), but I have not established prophets in idolatrous nations, for they are called beasts (*behemah*), as it says, ‘and many beasts’ (Jonah 4: 11).’¹¹¹ The viewpoint expressed here, although not consistently maintained in rabbinic literature,¹¹² is that prophecy is unique to the Jews, for

¹⁰⁸ *Exodus Rabbah* 4: 1; *Leviticus Rabbah* 5: 3; *Numbers Rabbah* 12: 14; *Deuteronomy Rabbah* 1: 2; *Esther Rabbah* 7: 11; *Midrash Tanhuma*, Ki Tissa 4; *Wayaqhel* 3; *Pesiqta Rabbati*, 10: 4, 47: 5; *Pesiqta de-Rav Kahana*, 2: 3, p. 18.

¹⁰⁹ Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 37a.

¹¹⁰ *Genesis Rabbah* 34: 13, p. 325.

¹¹¹ *Ecclesiastes Rabbah* 3: 22. See Solomon ben Isaac, *Perushei Rashi al ha-Torah*, 55: ‘“But he did not cut up the bird” (Gen. 15: 10) for the nations are compared to cattle, rams, and goats... and Israel are compared to doves... Therefore, the [the bird is mentioned] after the beasts to allude to the fact that the nations will be utterly destroyed, “but he did not cut up the bird”, alludes to the fact that Israel will exist everlastingly.’ See Isaac bar Judah Halevi, *Pa’aneah Raza*, 81: ‘“But he did not cut up the bird” (Gen. 15: 10): Rashi explained that this alludes to the fact that the nations will be destroyed, for the nations (*ummot*) are compared to beasts (*behemot*), *ummah* is numerically equivalent to *behemah*, and similarly *ummot* is numerically equivalent to *behemot*.’

¹¹² Thus, for example, there is the exegetical gloss on the verse, ‘Never again did there arise in Israel a prophet like Moses’ (Deut. 34: 10), ‘In Israel none arose, but one did arise in the nations of the world. And who was it? Balaam the son of Be’or.’ See *Sifre on Deuteronomy*, § 357, p. 430; *Numbers Rabbah* 20: 1; *Midrash Tanhuma*, Balaq, 1. Consider also the different perspectives assembled in *Song of Songs Rabbah* 2: 11, p. 57: According to a view transmitted in the name of R. Joshua ben Levi, before the Tent of Assembly was set up, the voice of divine speech (*qol ha-dibbur*) reached the nations of the world. The redactor placed a contrary opinion attributed to R. Simon immediately following this one according to which each divine word emerged with a dual efficacy, either as an elixir (*sam hayyim*, ‘drug of life’) for Israel or as a poison (*sam*

they are fully human, whereas the other nations are comparable to beasts.¹¹³ Here it is worth noting that the account of Israel's exceptionalness is linked specifically to the gift of prophecy in later medieval sources—Judah Halevi, for instance, comes to mind, a source that undoubtedly influenced the evolution of the ideas expressed by kabbalists.¹¹⁴

ha-mawet, 'drug of death') for the nations. The second view obviously undermines the first as it denies that the non-Israelite nations could be the worthy recipients of the word of prophecy. The orientation of R. Joshua ben Levi recurs in *ibid.* 2: 12, pp. 57–8, in a dictum ascribed to R. Isaac: before the Tent of Meeting was erected prophecy was found amongst the nations. Balaam proves to be the exception to the rule because prophecy was for the benefit of Israel. It is possible that in the midrashic context Balaam stands for Jesus, a symbolic identification that is made explicit in zoharic literature. This identification is suggested by the comparison that is made (based on a midrashic reading of Deut. 34: 10) between Moses and Balaam: just as no prophet exceeded the former with respect to the holy powers, so no prophet exceeded the latter with respect to the unholy powers. For references and further discussion, see Ch. 2, n. 46. The identification of Balaam and Jesus is also related to the association of both figures with magic, which is related in kabbalistic symbolism to the demonic realm. Consider the formulation in one of the fragments published by Deutsch, 'New Evidence', 185 to the effect that the books of magic in the possession of Jesus were copies of works traceable to Balaam that he found in Egypt. The linkage of Jesus (or Christianity more generally) and magical practices is a well-attested motif in polemical and non-polemical contexts. See Herford, *Christianity*, 54–6, 64–78; Brown, 'Sorcery, Demons'; Smith, *Jesus the Magician*; Benko, *Pagan Rome*, 103–39; Thee, *Julius Africanus*, 316–448; Segal, *Rebecca's Children*, 143–6; Stanton, 'Jesus of Nazareth'. See also *Nizzahon Vetus*, 63–4, 253. On the enduring impact of magical practices in Christian communities and the attitude of the Church through the Middle Ages, see Flint, *Rise of Magic*, 13–84; Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 25–50.

¹¹³ Consider, however, the anonymous rabbinic teaching preserved in Babylonian Talmud, *Ḥagigah 16a*: 'Six things are said with respect to men (*benei adam*), three of them are like the ministering angels and three of them like the beast. The three that are like the ministering angels: they have knowledge like the ministering angels, they walk with an erect posture like the ministering angels, and they converse in the holy language like the ministering angels. The three that are like the beast: they eat and drink like the beast, they procreate like the beast, and they discharge excrement like a beast.' The inclusion of conversing in Hebrew, the holy tongue (*leshon ha-qodesh*), in the list of angelic qualities makes it clear that *benei adam* here refers exclusively to Jews. In this context, then, Jews are not distinguished from non-Jews in terms of the angelic/beastly polarity since characteristics of the beast are applied to Jews themselves. The unique connection between knowledge (*da'at*) and the Jew may explain the contextualization of the *havdalah* service, which extols the distinctions between the holy and the profane, Israel and the nations of the world, Sabbath and the weekdays, in the blessing of the standing prayer concerning God's graceful bestowal of knowledge (*honen ha-da'at*). See Mishnah, *Berakhot* 5: 2; *Tosefta*, *Berakhot* 3: 9, p. 14; Palestinian Talmud, *Berakhot* 5: 2, 9*b*; Babylonian Talmud, *Berakhot* 26*b*, 29*a*, 33*a*; *Pesahim* 3*a*; *Yoma* 88*a*; *Ta'anit* 2*a*; *Niddah* 8*b*. Particularly important are the cluster of teachings preserved in Babylonian Talmud, *Berakhot* 33*a*, including the dictum attributed to R. Ami: 'Great is knowledge for it is placed between two letters [of the names] as it says "For the Lord is an all-knowing God" (*ki el de'ot yhwih*) (1 Sam. 2: 3), and it is forbidden to have compassion for anyone who is lacking knowledge, as it says, "for they are not a people lacking understanding" (Isa. 27: 11). Therefore the one who made him will have no compassion for him.'

¹¹⁴ For Halevi's influence on kabbalists, see Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*, 294–6, and references to other scholars cited on p. 295, n. 92.

The representation of Jews as human in contrast to the beastly character of non-Jews was greatly accentuated in medieval kabbalistic literature, and especially in the corpus of *Zohar*.¹¹⁵ To appreciate the animus propelling the kabbalistic polemic, however, it is necessary to take stock of the broader historical framework, and, in particular, the changing representations of Jews on the part of the Christian faithful.¹¹⁶ Although an adequate recounting of this matter lies beyond the scope of this chapter, let me cite the concise summary offered by Denise Despres: ‘An age of “classification,” the twelfth and thirteenth centuries laid the theological groundwork for those forms of late medieval devotion most anti-Judaic—Marian and Eucharistic devotion—which were linked in their concern for the physical integrity of the individual and social body.’¹¹⁷ Receiving the status as aliens and associated with contemporary forms of heresy,¹¹⁸ and typically characterized as beasts,¹¹⁹ the Jews were excluded from the *corpus mysticum*, the body of Christ incarnate in the institution of the Church, a significant change in the papal policy toward the Jews as it essentially undermined Augustine’s policy of toleration, a shift formally articulated in the anti-Jewish legislation of the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215. The persistence on the part of kabbalists, especially evident in the latter part of the thirteenth century, to distinguish sharply between the holy Jew and impure Gentile should be seen against this background; the internal construction of the notion of fraternity on the part of rabbinic authorities excluded the sons of Edom-Esau, an exclusion that had a profound impact on the status of Christians reflected in medieval halakhic

¹¹⁵ *Zohar* 1: 28b, 79b (*Sitrei Torah*), wherein the ‘spirit of the animal’ (*ruah ha-behemah*) or ‘animal soul’ (*nefesh ha-behemit*) is identified as the evil inclination; 2: 25b (*Piqqudin*), 86a, 120a (*Ra’aya Meheimna*), 275b; 3: 125a (*Ra’aya Meheimna*), 219a, 238b (*Ra’aya Meheimna*); *Zohar Hadash*, 37b, 78c–d; *Tiqunei Zohar*, § 47, 83b. See, however, *Zohar* 3: 173b, where *benei adam* (Ps. 31: 20) is interpreted as a reference to the worshippers of the stars and constellations. See below, n. 287. I note, finally, that some of the kabbalistic passages (including from *zoharic* literature) that express the ontological distinction between Jew and non-Jew on the basis of the rabbinic notion that only the former is called human were cited and analysed in the anti-Jewish polemical work by Eisenmenger, *Entdecktes Judenthum*, 590–9. Concerning this work, see Krauss, *Jewish–Christian Controversy*, 144–5, and Carlebach, *Divided Souls*, 212–21.

¹¹⁶ For a recent attempt to consider the legacy of the Augustinian doctrine of Jewish witness in the environment of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, see Cohen, *Living Letters of the Law*. On the changing attitudes toward Christianity in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries shaped by the augmentation of polemical attack, see Dahan, *Christian Polemic*; Cohen, ‘Second Disputation’; Chazan, *Fashioning*.

¹¹⁷ Despres, ‘Mary of the Eucharist’, 379.

¹¹⁸ On the presentation of Judaism as heresy during this period, see Cohen, *Living Letters*, 317–63.

¹¹⁹ For an extensive discussion of the use of animal metaphors in the polemical exchange between Jews and Christians, see Cuffel, ‘Filthy Words’, 429–98.

literature.¹²⁰ It is true, as I argued above, that the animosity of kabbalists in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries was inspired and fuelled by many dicta in rabbinic texts from the formative period, but one cannot ignore the exigencies of the particular moment, and the increased Christian assault on Jews, no doubt, played an instrumental role in shaping the kabbalistic rhetoric.

In my judgement, one of the strongest proofs for taking into account the external pressure from the emerging cultic anti-Judaism and its desire to purge the mystical body of Christ of Jews and heretics is the fact that the extreme and unrelenting contrast between Jew and non-Jew is found in other sources from this period. The sharpening of the polemical tone in these disparate sources and the demonization of the Christian indicate to me that identical themes in kabbalistic texts should be viewed as a concerted strategy to respond to the demonization of the Jew on the part of Christians, frequently in the form of the Antichrist, the diabolical double of Jesus who through the art of imitation obfuscated the distinction between reality and image, right and wrong, truth and falsity.¹²¹

Let me cite a salient articulation of the matter by Eleazar of Worms, the leading figure in the Kalonymide circle of the thirteenth-century Rhineland Jewish pietists:

‘Upon this semblance of a throne, there was the semblance of a human form’ (Ezek. 1: 26). ‘[Let us make man] in our image and in our likeness. And God created man in his image, in the image of God he created him’ (Gen. 1: 26–7). This is speaking about Israel and not the uncircumcised (*arelim*). ‘For you, my flock, that I tend are men, and I am your God, declares the Lord’ (Ezek. 34: 31). With respect to circumcision it is written, ‘I will set up a covenant between me and you, and your offspring to come, an everlasting covenant through the generations (*ledorotam liverit olam*), to be God to you and to your offspring to come’ (Gen. 17: 7). Whence do we know that they who observe Sabbath (*ha-shomrim shabbat*) are called human (*adam*)? As it is written, ‘it shall be a sign everlastingly (*ot hi le’olam*) between me and the children of Israel’ (Exod. 31: 17). Thus, with respect to Sabbath it is written ‘everlastingly’ (*le’olam*), so with respect to circumcision. We deduce from this that one who is not circumcised and who does not observe Sabbath is not called human (*adam*), as it says, ‘the man (*ben adam*) who holds fast to it, who observes Sabbath’ (Isa. 56: 2). The holy One, blessed be he, observes Sabbath and he commanded circumcision in order to indicate that there is no matter of the foreskin above and also not to be wed to the uncircum-

¹²⁰ See e.g. Soloveitchik, *Pawnbroking*, 170–221; Blidstein, ‘Menahem Meiri’s Attitude’, 120–7. On the typology of Jacob and Esau, see Cohen, *Studies*, 243–69; Yuval, ‘Two Nations’, 18–34.

¹²¹ Groebner, *Defaced*, 112–14. On the diabolic representation of Jews and Muslims on the part of Christian writers, see the evidence adduced by Echevarria, *Fortress*, 167, and Nirenberg, *Communities*, 93–124.

cised, worshippers of the other god. They observe 248 positive commandments in the image of God (*be-šelem elohim*), which is numerically 248, and *avraham* equals 248.¹²²

In no uncertain terms, Eleazar informs the reader that the term *adam* is applied uniquely to the Jewish people for only they have been created in God's image. The matter is even more delimiting, as Jewish males are privileged in virtue of the claim that only one who is circumcised and who keeps Sabbath is, properly speaking, called *adam*. The two rites are assigned to God, that is, he keeps Sabbath and he has commanded Israel about circumcision. It is evident that there is an asymmetry between the two ritual acts associated with God, keeping Sabbath and commanding about circumcision; one would have expected either that God is said to have commanded both or performed both. I surmise that we have evidence here of the author's attempt to conceal something of the esoteric tradition, as he was reluctant to write of God's circumcision as this would necessarily imply the attribution of a phallus. Support for this suggestion may be gathered from other passages wherein Eleazar goes to great lengths to hide a teaching predicated on attributing sexual or erotic images to the divine.¹²³ Be that as it may, the intent of the latter is twofold, theological and sociological, to show that the aspect above that corresponds to the foreskin has been removed—even though it is inappropriate to speak of God undergoing the rite of circumcision¹²⁴—and to warn Jews against marrying the uncircumcised, which should be taken more specifically as a reference to Christians. The biblical notion of the divine image is related to the observance of the commandments, a point that is anchored by the numerical value of the expression *be-šelem elohim*, that is, 248, which corresponds to the number of positive commandments according to rabbinic jurisprudence. This is also the numerical value of *avraham*, which

¹²² Eleazar ben Judah of Worms, *Sodei Razayya*, 145. A parallel to this text, which appears in the section of *Sod Ma'aseh Bere'shit*, the first part of the compendium *Sodei Razayya*, organized around the letters of the name of Eleazar, is found in a version of Eleazar's *Perush ha-Merkavah*, extant in MS Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale héb. 850, fol. 55a. Regarding the relationship of these two texts, see *Commentaries to Ezekiel's Chariot of R. Eleazar*, 16–19.

¹²³ For an elaboration of this approach, see Farber-Ginat, 'Concept'; Wolfson, 'Image of Jacob'; English version in id., *Along the Path*, 1–62; and id., 'Sacred Space', 624–34.

¹²⁴ See, by contrast, the daring statement in Eleazar ben Moses ha-Darshan, 'Commentary on *Sefer Yeširah*', 73. Commenting on the reference in *Sefer Yeširah* to the 'covenant of the foreskin' (*milat ha-ma'or*), Eleazar writes: 'That is, in the case of man, his phallus (*milato*) is in the middle of the body, and, as it were, so it is with regard to the Creator.' It must be stated, however, that the author of this commentary, including in the passage to which I have referred, unequivocally denies a literal understanding of the anthropomorphic characteristics attributed to God. On the contrary, he repeatedly notes that these attributions must be explained as figurative comparisons—a 'sign' (*ot*) or an 'example' (*dugma*)—that allow us to imagine the divine in terms drawn from human experience. See the remarks of Abrams, in his edition of Eleazar ben Moses ha-Darshan, 'Commentary on *Sefer Yeširah*', 70–1.

underscores the point that the true embodiment of the divine image is in the Jewish people who fulfill the 248 injunctions. Significantly, the claim in *Sefer ha-Bahir*, considered to be one of the oldest collections of kabbalistic teaching, that the word *adam* applies most suitably to Jews, is based on similar argumentation:

R. Amora said: Why is it written, 'And the sea is full of the Lord's blessing, take possession on the west and south' (Deut. 33: 23)? Thus Moses said: If you walk in his laws, you will inherit this world and the world to come, which is compared to the sea, as it says, 'and broader than the sea' (Job 11: 9). And this world is compared to the south, as it says, 'you have given me away as the land of the Negev' (Josh. 15: 19), which is translated [in the Targum] as 'land of the south.' Further, why did the holy One, blessed be he, add *he* from all the letters to [the name of] Abraham? So that all the limbs of the man (*adam*) would merit eternal life (*ḥayyei ha-olam*), which is compared to the sea. It is, as it were, that the edifice (*binyan*) is completed in him, as it is written, 'For in his image did God make man' (Gen. 9: 6), and [the name] *avraham* numerically is 248 corresponding to the number of man's limbs.¹²⁵

Without unpacking all of the relevant details in the bahiric exegesis, let me note that the change in the name of the patriarch from 'Abram' to 'Abraham' (Gen. 17: 5)¹²⁶ is presented as an illustration of the principle that one who follows God's laws will merit this world and the world-to-come. The name *avraham*, which is formed by the addition of *he* to *avram*, numerically equals 248, which corresponds to the number of human limbs according to rabbinic calculation.¹²⁷ The implicit claim here is that one attains eternal life by fulfilling the commandments with one's bodily limbs. The figure of Abraham, the first patriarch of the Hebrews, represents the idealized human being, and hence the verse concerning the creation of Adam in the image of God (Gen. 9: 6) is applied specifically to him, and the edifice (*binyan*) is said to be completed through him. I do not think it unreasonable to presume that other references in the bahiric anthology that depict the limbs of the divine anthropos are similarly attributable to Israel as the prototype of humanity.¹²⁸ The morphological affinity between the imaginal form of God and human anatomy is realized exclusively in the embodied state of the Jew.¹²⁹ In terms of

¹²⁵ Abrams, *Book Bahir*, §§ 5–6, p. 121.

¹²⁶ It is instructive to note that Gen. 17: 4, which immediately precedes the change of Abram's name to Abraham, is cited in *Book Bahir*, § 39, p. 139, in conjunction with the covenant that God decreed with the patriarch between his ten toes, i.e. the covenant of circumcision.

¹²⁷ Babylonian Talmud, Makkot 23b.

¹²⁸ See *Book Bahir*, § 55, p. 151, § 114, p. 199, § 116, p. 201. The lack of attentiveness to the issue I am raising on the part of scholars is epitomized by Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape*, 43–5, who writes about the form of the Primal Adam in the *Bahir* as if it were a universal human form.

¹²⁹ On the cosmic role of righteous Jews to sustain the world by strengthening the *axis mundi*, see *Book Bahir*, § 71, p. 161. See § 105, p. 189. On Israel as the firstborn of God, see § 73, p. 163.

a botanical image employed in another bahiric passage, which parallels the anatomical symbol, the 'holy forms' of the angelic potencies¹³⁰ are assigned to each nation, whereas 'holy Israel' takes the crown¹³¹ and heart of the tree, the latter image bringing to mind the celebrated formulation of Judah Halevi who depicted the Jews amongst the nations as the heart of the body.¹³² According to that text, moreover, the special ontic status of the Jew is enacted symbolically in the ritual of lifting up the palm-branch (*kappot temarim* or *lulav*) together with the citron fruit (*peri eš hadar* or *etrog*) on the festival of Tabernacles (Lev. 23: 40).¹³³ We read in another bahiric fragment that the potencies of God are comparable to a tree for they are arranged vertically.¹³⁴ The fruits that are borne by this tree are the souls of the righteous, which bloom forth on account of the good deeds of Israel.¹³⁵ In the section of *Bahir* wherein the ten utterances (*ma'amarot*) are delineated, the seventh is identified as the eastern direction of the world whence issues forth the seed of Israel, 'for the spinal column extends from the brain of a man and comes to the penis and from there is the seed'.¹³⁶ When Jews are righteous new seed comes forth from this attribute, but when they are evil the old seed is recycled, clearly intimating the doctrine of reincarnation.¹³⁷ The distinctive connection between Israel and the tree parallels the ethnic identification of the divine anthropos as Jewish.¹³⁸ Indeed, according to what appears to be an ancient mythologoumenon preserved in the bahiric anthology, the twelve tribes of Israel correspond to twelve potencies of God, which are compared parabolically to twelve channels (*šinatorot*) that stem from the spring (*ma'yan*).¹³⁹ The common denominator to these autonomous traditions is that Israel occupies

¹³⁰ See *ibid.*, §§ 77–9, pp. 165–7. By contrast, in § 116, p. 201, the seven holy forms that belong to God appear to be the divine potencies that correspond to limbs of the human body. This distinction was noted by Scholem, *Origins*, 55, n. 10. See, however, *id.*, *On the Mystical Shape*, 43, where it is suggested that the 'holy forms' in both passages in *Sefer ha-Bahir* denote the *sefirot*.

¹³¹ My translation assumes that the reading here is *nof ha-illan*, 'top of the tree', but the reading *guf ha-illan* is also attested, which should be rendered as 'trunk of the tree'. Both readings are plausible. See Scholem, *Das Buch Bahir*, § 67, p. 70, n. 3.

¹³² Judah Halevi, *Sefer ha-Kuzari*, II. 36, 44, and on the comparison of Israel to the seed of the tree, IV. 23.

¹³³ *Book Bahir*, § 67, p. 159. See § 118, p. 203. On the contrast between Israel and the seventy nations, see § 113, p. 197.

¹³⁴ See Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape*, 42–3.

¹³⁵ *Book Bahir*, § 85, p. 171.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, § 104, p. 187.

¹³⁷ See *ibid.*, § 126, p. 209. For discussion of the doctrine of transmigration of souls in the bahiric anthology, see Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape*, 201–7.

¹³⁸ See *Book Bahir*, § 94, pp. 179–81, where Israel is identified as one attribute (*middah*) of God, the divine thought, in which there is the Torah of truth. See also § 96, p. 181.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, § 82, p. 169.

the most elevated rank in the ontological hierarchy, for they are the race of people that bear the divine nature in the fabric of their being.

I will provide here one more example from an early kabbalistic source to suggest how paramount and ubiquitous is the anthropological claim here being investigated. I have in mind the following passage from the commentary on *Sefer Yeşirah* that preserves the teachings of Isaac the Blind, son of Abraham ben David of Posquières and teacher of several kabbalists who lived in the region of Catalonia, primarily in Gerona.¹⁴⁰ The relevant passage is an explication of the reference in this older work of Jewish cosmogony to three patrices (*avot*) that derive from three matrices (*immot*), which consist of *alef*, *mem*, and *shin*:¹⁴¹

‘Three mothers’: Things that emanate and are emanated, and that receive one from the other, but when it reaches the world of separate beings (*olam ha-nifradim*) they are only called ‘patrices’ for from them is offspring. In the beginning [they were called matrices],¹⁴² for the patrices themselves are similarly called like flames that come from coals. When it reaches the world of separate beings it becomes the agent¹⁴³ that issues from the matrices. . . . Therefore, everything is sealed with the patrices, and it speaks of how world, year, and soul are made of them, and those combinations were created and emanated from them. Man (*adam*) himself is constructed by the letters, and when that edifice was constructed the supernal spirit that guides him guides everything, and thus everything is joined together in the supernal and lower beings.¹⁴⁴

Prima facie, one might suppose that the author of this text is speaking of the universal condition of the human being, the structure that completes and thus comprehends all of creation. Seemingly this is the force of the claim, which is based on the second part of *Sefer Yeşirah*, that *adam* is constructed by the letters, that is, the letters are the basic stuff of being and the human is a

¹⁴⁰ A number of important studies on Isaac have been written in the last few decades. Here I will mention a few of the relatively recent sources: Pedaya, “‘Flaw’ and ‘Correction’”; id., *Name and Sanctuary*; Sender, ‘Emergence’. On the question of the authorship of the text, see Scholem, *Origins*, 257–8; Sender, ‘Emergence’, 1: 45–50.

¹⁴¹ Gruenwald, ‘Preliminary Critical Edition’, § 27, p. 153. See now Hayman, *Sefer Yeşira*, 116–17.

¹⁴² I have accepted the reconstruction of Sender, ‘Emergence’, 2: 130–1, n. 61.

¹⁴³ I have rendered *ha-po’el* as ‘the agent’. By contrast, Sender, ‘Emergence’, 2: 131, translates the expression as ‘the effect’, apparently vocalizing the word as *ha-pu’al*. This translation misses the point of the text, which is to emphasize that the potencies signified by the matrix letters assume a masculine quality in the world of separate entities below the *sefirot* where they produce offspring. In the gender hierarchy of medieval kabbalah, as I have argued in many of my studies, the active force is depicted consistently as masculine and the passive as feminine. The patrices, therefore, must be viewed as agents rather than effects.

¹⁴⁴ Isaac the Blind, *Perush Sefer Yeşirah*, 13. For analysis of the emanationist doctrine articulated in this passage, see Sender, ‘Emergence’, 1: 120–1.

microcosm of the entire chain of existence.¹⁴⁵ From the above citation this is a reasonable interpretation. However, a second passage from the same work makes it entirely clear that the term *adam* denotes the Jew to the exclusion of all other ethnicities:

From what one comprehends one can discern what one cannot comprehend, and thus the measures (*middot*) arose, for language can comprehend only that which comes out from him, since a man (*adam*) cannot comprehend the measure of the [divine] speech and the letters (*middat ha-dibbur we-ha-otiyot*) but only the measure [of language] itself (*middatah be-ašmah*). There is no measure outside the letters. All the sublime measures are given to be meditated upon (*lehitbonen*), for each measure receives from the measure above it, and they are given to Israel to contemplate from the measure seen in the heart, to contemplate to the Infinite. There is no way to pray except by means of the delimited things by means of which a man (*adam*) is received and elevated in thought to the Infinite.¹⁴⁶

I have had the occasion to discuss this richly nuanced text elsewhere, as have other scholars of kabbalah, and I will not here reiterate all the relevant issues.¹⁴⁷ What is essential for the purposes of this analysis is to note that this context proves unequivocally that the word *adam* refers to the Jewish man who can reach the Infinite through contemplating the letters of liturgical speech in which are contained the divine potencies. It would have never occurred to the kabbalist living in medieval times that the contemplative praxis was applicable to anyone but the Jewish male, and even this was significantly limited to small groups who identified themselves as the spiritual elite, the ‘remnants of Israel’, as it were. The underlying assumption is that Jews alone bear the divine image, which, understood kabbalistically, relates to the sefirotic potencies configured imaginably in the form of an anthropos. Similarly, when Isaac’s disciple, Ezra of Gerona, states that ‘man is composed of all the spiritual entities’ (*ha-adam kalul mi-kol ha-devarim ha-ruhaniyim*),¹⁴⁸ the reference is to the Jew whose being derives from the stuff of the world of divine emanations. In another passage, Ezra describes the eschatological state in terms that reflect the rigid ontological difference dividing Jew and Gentile: ‘The souls of Israel will be separated from the souls of the nations for the souls of the righteous are not mixed together with the souls of the wicked.’¹⁴⁹ The presumption expressed in this comment is that the nations are wicked and Israel righteous, a dualism that is developed

¹⁴⁵ See Wolfson, ‘Anthropomorphic Imagery’; id., *Language, Eros, Being*, 197–202.

¹⁴⁶ Isaac the Blind, *Perush Sefer Yeširah*, 6.

¹⁴⁷ See Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*, 290 and references cited in n. 74 *ad loc.* See also Sendor, ‘Emergence’, 1: 246–61.

¹⁴⁸ For references, see Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*, 295, n. 93.

¹⁴⁹ The text of Ezra is cited in Azriel of Gerona, *Commentary on Talmudic Aggadah*, 13.

in more overtly ominous ways by later kabbalists, as we shall see at a later juncture in this chapter.

So pervasive was the ethnocentrism that even kabbalists who, due to the influence of medieval rationalism, especially as articulated by Maimonides, identified the essence of man as the faculty of reason, applied this taxonomy specifically to Jews. Consider, for example, the following words in the introduction to *Arba'ah Qinyyanim* by Judah Campanton, the fourteenth-century disciple of Yomtov ben Abraham Ishbili of Seville, who was, in turn, the pupil of Solomon ben Abraham Ibn Adret, the student of Moses ben Nahman:¹⁵⁰ ‘In each and every section, this matter will itself be explained to show you that the essence of the intention of creation of the world was for the sake of man (*adam*), and all the existent beings apart from him were not created by God, blessed be he, except for the service of man, that is, for the service of that nation in which the form of man (*šurat adam*) is established by their doing his will, blessed be he.’¹⁵¹

In other passages in this treatise, Campanton accepts the philosophical view that human nature is most distinctively characterized by the rational faculty, and it is on account of the latter—which is identified further as the divine image, since God is described (in Maimonidean terms) as possessing the ‘intellect that is perpetually actualized’ (*sekhel be-fo'al tamid*)¹⁵²—that man occupies the central position in the ontological hierarchy. Campanton, however, qualifies the anthropocentrism by stating that all things have been created specifically for Jews, the nation that expresses the human form most perfectly by fulfilling the divine decrees embodied in the commandments of Torah.¹⁵³ Thus, the medieval exegete, who forges a seemingly seamless web

¹⁵⁰ See Golomb, ‘Judah ben Solomon Campanton’, 1–8.

¹⁵¹ Judah ben Solomon Campanton, *Arba'ah Qinyyanim*, MS New York, Jewish Theological Seminary of America Library 2532, fol. 6b. For an alternative translation, see Golomb, ‘Judah ben Solomon Campanton’, 35; the original text appears on 81. Compare the explanation of the anthropomorphic form of the enthroned glory envisioned by Ezekiel in Judah ben Solomon Campanton, *Leqah Tov*, MS Oxford, Bodleian Library 1642, fols. 5a–b: ‘He compared that image to its creator for man (*adam*) is the first of all existents beneath him, that is, that nation within which is that form, and on account of it man is called *adam*, as it is written, “you are my flock, the flock of my shepherd, for you are men” (Ezek. 34: 31), you are called men but the nations of the world are not called men.’

¹⁵² *Arba'ah Qinyyanim*, fol. 5b. For an alternative translation, see Golomb, ‘Judah ben Solomon Campanton’, 33; the original text appears on p. 79.

¹⁵³ See *ibid.*, fol. 4b (Golomb, 29 and 78), where Campanton states explicitly that the purpose of the biblical commandments is to afford the Jew the opportunity to know God through the intellect and to be conjoined to him. A similar ethnocentric interpretation of a philosophical anthropology is found in Cordovero, *Shi'ur Qomah*, 68b. On the one hand, Cordovero affirms that the divine image of the human being relates to the intellect, but, on the other, he asserts that the difference between Jews and other nations is like the difference between humans and

from aggadic, philosophic, and kabbalistic threads of thinking, embraces the rabbinic idea that Israel, the nation to whom the term *adam* is most accurately applied,¹⁵⁴ preceded everything, including Torah, which is made in the form of a human, the 248 precepts corresponding to the limbs and the 365 prohibitions corresponding to the sinews.¹⁵⁵ He expresses the ontic distinction between Jews and non-Jews in the following language: ‘From the words of the sages, blessed be their memory, it is made clear that the souls of all the nations are from the heavenly spheres, and thus they were obligated only in seven commandments, and Israel, who are obligated in six hundred and thirteen commandments, have the rational soul (*nefesh ha-sekhel*) from him, blessed be he.’¹⁵⁶ A sign of the ontological difference is that the spirit of prophecy resides uniquely upon the Jewish people.¹⁵⁷ Campanton’s eschatology, moreover, embraces the notion that in the end of days Jews shall be restored to the original condition of Adam, and they will accordingly comprehend the intelligible (*muskkal*) without the medium of a corporeal body.¹⁵⁸

A proper understanding of the anthropomorphic depiction of God in kabbalistic symbolism rests upon the recognition that the human form relates to Israel, which is fully embodied in the Jewish male, in contrast to the other nations. To cite one of the bolder formulations of this idea from zoharic literature:

These [sefirotic] lights form an image below to establish the image of everything that is contained within Adam, for the inner form of all inner forms is called by this name, and from here [we know that] every form that is contained in this emanation is called *adam*, as it is written, ‘for you are men’ (Ezek. 34: 31), you are called men but not the rest of the nations, for they are idolaters. . . . The spirit that emanates upon the rest of the idolatrous nations, which derives from the side that is not holy, is not considered [to be under the category of] *adam*.¹⁵⁹

animals. We must assume, therefore, that, according to this notable sixteenth-century kabbalist, the rational faculty is most fully developed in the Jewish people.

¹⁵⁴ See e.g. *Arba’ah Qinyanim*, fol. 22b: ‘When a man (*adam*) performs the commandments he is worthy of being amongst those who are close to the Lord, for he comes from there and he made and created him for this, but when the nations perform them it is the law that they are guilty of death according to the dictum of the verse “the stranger who comes close will die”’ See *ibid.*, fol. 54a. Many other passages could have been cited, but this one will suffice to provide textual support for the claim that Campanton distinguished sharply between the Jew, who is called *adam*, and the other nations.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, fol. 7b (Golomb, 40–1, 84).

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, fol. 22a.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, fol. 8a (Golomb, 41, 84),

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, fol. 58b.

¹⁵⁹ *Zohar* 1: 20b. See Ch. 3, n. 190.

Building upon the rabbinic exegesis of the verse in Ezekiel, the zoharic authors demonstrate the fact that Israel alone of the nations is called *adam*, which denotes that the Jew is human in the fullest and most proper sense.¹⁶⁰

The point is made poignantly in the following passage from the commentary on Ruth that is part of the *Midrash ha-Ne'elam* stratum of the *Zohar*:

Rabbi began [his exposition] and said: The primal Adam is the soul of the soul, and Eve is the soul. Cain and Abel: Abel is of the same type as Adam and Eve, which is called the holy spirit. Cain is the spirit of impurity of the left, which is called an admixture (*kil'ayim*),¹⁶¹ that is, an unnecessary combination, the other side, which is not of the type of Adam and Eve. Concerning this [it says] 'You shall not plow with an ox and an ass together' (Deut. 22: 10). Thus you should not enter the holy covenant in other dominion, [as it says] 'You shall not have other gods before me' (Exod. 20: 3). Adam is in the pattern of that which is above. The 'other gods' consist of the ass and she-ass, male and female. Accordingly, it is written with regard to the one who enters the holy covenant into the other dominion, 'They have rebelled against the Lord, and thus they have begotten alien children' (Hos. 5: 7). There is no jealousy before the holy One, blessed be he, except for that which concerns the holy covenant. The holy One, blessed be he, created in man (*inash*) YHWH, which is his holy name, the soul of the soul, and this is called *adam*.¹⁶²

The distinction between Jews and other nations is expressed typologically in terms of Cain representing the left side of impurity and Abel aligned with the right side of holiness. Predictably, othering and division of humankind into the good seed and bad seed begins with the birth of Cain and Abel.

¹⁶⁰ The same philological usage is evident in Moses de León's Hebrew theosophic writings. See e.g. *Sheqel ha-Qodesh*, 14: 'When man (*ha-adam*) defiles himself he draws upon himself the spirit of impurity and he becomes more defiled, but when the man disciplines himself in good deeds and he draws himself after holiness, they sanctify him from above and he draws upon himself the holy spirit, and the holiness from above dwells on him.' The text only makes sense if we assume that *adam* denotes the Jewish man who can be under the influence of either holiness or impurity. See also Moses de León, *Book of the Pomegranate*, 389; id., '*Sefer ha-Mishkal*', 39–47. In the latter context, Moses de León elaborates on the three different aspects of the soul of man (*nefesh*, *ruah*, and *neshamah*), but it is evident from the presumption regarding the divine nature of the soul that the word *adam* refers exclusively to the Jew since only Jews (as de León himself states explicitly on p. 41) are rooted in the trunk of the tree of sefirotic emanations. According to de León, the 'secret of the supernal soul' is in the 'pattern of the Creator in the manner that the son is from the father . . . thus the supernal soul is a structure in the pattern of the Creator, and it is the image of God' (p. 45). One might presume that this depiction is applied universally to all human beings, but the continuation of the text (pp. 46–7) makes clear that the reference is to Jews alone, for the soul can draw the force of holiness into the world only by fulfilling the ritual commandments of the Torah, a possibility that is afforded exclusively to the Jewish people.

¹⁶¹ In *Tiqqunei Zohar*, § 67, 114b, the dual nature of Cain is related to the fact that he derived 'from the side of the Tree of Good and Evil', the good extending until Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses, but the rest of his progeny from that historical juncture has been evil.

¹⁶² *Zohar Hadash*, 78c.

Understood kabbalistically, Cain was the offspring of the illicit union of the holy and demonic (Eve and the serpent), the ox and the donkey,¹⁶³ whereas Abel is the progeny of the sanctioned coupling of the holy pair (Eve and Adam).¹⁶⁴ The presumption here, borne out by many other passages, is that the first Adam, the prototypical human, is the idealized Jew created in the image of God (*ṣelem elohim*),¹⁶⁵ a theme attested in classical rabbinic litera-

¹⁶³ The symbolic depiction of the Jew and non-Jew respectively as the masculine ox and feminine ass is reworked in an interesting homily in *Zohar* 3: 163a–b: ‘In the mishnah of Bezalel, it is written “And God remembered Rachel” (Gen. 30: 22). In [the case of] Sarah it is written *peqidah* (Gen. 21: 1) and in [the case of] Rachel *zekhirah*. Why? For *zakhor*, the perfect covenant (*berit shelim*), was inscribed (*itreshim*) in Jacob when Joseph was born. How so? When he took the ox along with him so that it would not be fortified on the other side. Hence, Joseph is called “the firstborn of his ox” (Deut. 33: 17), the firstborn of the ox taken by Jacob, “the firstborn of his ox” (*bekhor shoro*), and it pushed aside that ox. The blameless ox (*shor tam*), and Jacob was a “perfect man” (*ish tam*) (Gen. 25: 27), lord and ruler, master of the house wherein the blameless ox resides, for there is an ox that is marked (*shor mu’ad*) on the side of the foreskin . . . and it is united with the evil donkey, and thus it is written “You shall not plough with an ox and an ass together” (Deut. 22: 10), so as not to arouse them.’ In this passage, the ox clearly represents the phallic potency, *shor tam* is connected symbolically to the holy gradation of *Yesod*, and *shor mu’ad* to the corresponding attribute on the side of impurity. The donkey is the feminine power of the left side. See *Zohar* 1: 172b–173a. Finally, mention should be made of the Christian tradition that the ox and donkey were the animals found together with the baby Jesus in the manger, a tradition that is linked exegetically to Isa. 1: 3. In *Nizzahon Vetus*, 124 and 164, these animals are presented as evidence for the lowly status of Jesus.

¹⁶⁴ The zoharic portrayal of Cain and Abel as the respective archetypes of the wicked and the righteous is found in *Pirqei Rabbi Eli’ezer*, ch. 21, 48a, and ch. 22, 50a–b. On the related tradition that Cain was the offspring of Samael and Eve, see Targum Pseudo-Jonathan to Gen. 4: 3; Bowker, *Targums and Rabbinic Literature*, 132 and 136, n. 1. Mention should be made of a passage in a section labelled as *Midrash ha-Ne’elam* on Song of Songs in *Zohar Hadash*, 63c, where the soul of Cain is said to derive from the filth of the serpent implanted in Eve but his body from Adam, which is linked exegetically to the words of Eve that explain the etymology of Cain’s name (*qayin*) ‘I have acquired a male with God’, *qaniti ish et yhw* (Gen. 4: 1), that is, together with Adam who supplied the corporeal encasement. The desire of Adam to cohabit with Eve is explained in that context as being occasioned by the serpent’s action.

¹⁶⁵ *Zohar* 1: 34b. The implicitly Jewish nature of Adam is suggested as well by the zoharic reworking of the aggadic motif that Jacob bore the image of Adam. See *Zohar* 1: 35b; Wolfson, ‘Re/membering’, 218–20. Another idea related to the Jewish portrayal of Adam is the identification of the latter as the first to receive the esoteric wisdom of the tradition (*qabbalah*), which is consistently portrayed as the unique possession of Israel. See *Zohar* 1: 52a; 2: 55a; *Sheqel ha-Qodesh*, 17. The tracing of the chain of tradition to Adam is known from other kabbalistic writings from the zoharic period, including the works of Abraham Abulafia and his disciples. See Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, 17, 151–2, n. 89. The portrayal of kabbalah as the unique patrimony of the Jewish people has persisted throughout the generations. A particularly interesting formulation is found in Abraham ben Eliezer ha-Levi, *Iggeret Sod ha-Ge’ullah*, 10. According to this text, the fact that enlightened individuals (*maskilim*) from Christian nations (*benei edom*) had sought to learn the esoteric wisdom from Jews facilitates the need to emphasize that kabbalah is particular to the Jewish people. Abraham ha-Levi states categorically that kabbalistic mysteries must be concealed from non-Jews. The roots for this view are much older, for kabbalists often made the point that the mystery of the name, which may be viewed as

ture.¹⁶⁶ The male Jew is forbidden to engage in intercourse with a non-Jewish woman, for to do so would be to enter the holy covenant into the alien domain, a sexual transgression equivalent to worshipping a false god. In contrast to other nations, which are compared to the male and female ass,¹⁶⁷ the soul of the Jew is the genuinely androgynous human (signified by the term *adam*), which is linked to the deity by way of numerology, an association that is best appreciated if one bears in mind that when the four letters of YHWH are written out in full (*ywd he waw he*) their numerical value is 45, the same as the word *adam*, a theme widely confirmed in kabbalistic literature. The adamic nature of Israel is thus connected mathematically to the most sacred of divine names,¹⁶⁸ indeed, the name that kabbalists, following the locution of medieval philosophical exegesis, referred to as *shem ha-ēšem*, the name of the essence, the essential name.¹⁶⁹ Simply put, esoteric gnosis expresses the unique relationship between Israel and God in terms of the Tetragrammaton. For instance, in his commentary to Psalm 99: 3, Abraham Ibn Ezra expressed the matter: ‘“Your name” refers to the honorable essential name (*shem ha-ēšem ha-nikhbad*) that was revealed by Moses to Israel, for in all the languages God does not have a glorious name (*shem kavod*) except with Israel alone.’ A special connection thus pertains between Israel’s identity and the name of God; the unique people who singularly corroborate the uniqueness and singularity of the divine being, *ens necessarium*.¹⁷⁰

the essence of the kabbalah, can be transmitted only to one who is circumcised. For a similar view in the writings of Cordovero, see below, n. 387.

¹⁶⁶ See e.g. *Sifre on Deuteronomy*, § 41, p. 87. In that context, God’s placing Adam in the Garden of Eden ‘to till it and to tend it’ (Gen. 2: 15) is interpreted as a reference to the fact that the task of primordial man was to study Torah and to fulfil the commandments. Surely, this exegesis makes little sense unless we assume that Adam represents the ideal pious Jew.

¹⁶⁷ Later on in this passage, *Zohar Ḥadash*, 78c, the verse ‘Cursed is the one who lives with any beast’ (Deut. 27: 21), is interpreted as a reference to a Cuthite woman, which is the ‘body that is from the side of the other impure beast above’. It seems that this is a cryptic allusion to a Christian woman. Cf. the reference to the Cuthite man in *Zohar* 3: 200a who enquires of R. Eleazar about the seemingly superior power of Balaam in comparison to Moses. I would suggest that in that case as well there is an encoded hint to a Christian. On the possibility that Balaam stands for Jesus, see above, n. 112. The use of the image of the ass to symbolize non-Jews is based on rabbinic sources, which in turn expand the imagery of Ezek. 23: 20. See Stern, *Jewish Identity*, 37–9; and further discussion in Ch. 2, n. 46.

¹⁶⁸ *Zohar Ḥadash*, 120c (*Tiqqunim*).

¹⁶⁹ See Abraham Ibn Ezra’s commentary to Exod. 3: 15, 6: 3, 9: 28, 15: 2, 22: 19, 23: 21, 33: 21, 34: 6, 34: 7; Deut. 6: 3; Ps. 72: 19, 96: 2, 99: 3, 103: 1, 138: 2. See also Maimonides, *Guide*, I. 61.

¹⁷⁰ It is of interest to note here that even in the rationalist philosophy of Maimonides the uniqueness of Israel is connected to the sanctification of the divine name, the semiotic marker of God’s ontological singularity as the being whose existence is necessary, *meḥuyav ha-meši’ut* (*Guide*, I. 57), which finds its basis in Mosaic prophecy and the revelation of Torah. For a full exposition of this theme, see Kaplan, ‘Maimonides on the Singularity of the Jewish People’. The critical difference between Maimonides and the kabbalists lies in the fact that in the thought of

Underlying the abstract philosophical concept is a mythic belief that reaches deep into the religious sensibility of Jewish esotericism. As an anonymous poet pithily put it, *qehillot ya'aqov reshumim be-shimkha*, 'communities of Jacob inscribed with your name'.¹⁷¹ According to another zoharic passage: 'The holy One, blessed be he, gave the mystery of his name exclusively to Israel and he rules over Israel and over Jerusalem, as it is written, "For your name is proclaimed upon your city and your people" (Dan. 9: 19), and the idolatrous nations have no portion in the holy One, blessed be he, as it is written, "And all the nations of the earth will see that the Lord's name is proclaimed over you" (Deut. 28: 10).'¹⁷² There are several ways that one might construe the inscription of the Jews with the divine name, but it seems to me that the most convincing is that in these words is an allusion to the correlation of the name and circumcision, a doctrine shared by masters of esoteric lore from disparate times and localities.¹⁷³

Medieval kabbalists accentuated what they considered to be the ancient belief regarding the inscription of circumcision as a means to transform the fleshly penis into the bearer of the semiotic seal of the phallus, the site of the marking of the invisible through the disclosure of the hidden.¹⁷⁴ The corporality of the covenant is thus both preserved and subverted, preserved because the site where the covenant is cut is the male organ, but subverted since the mystical understanding of the ritual is that the divine name, YHWH, is inscribed on and thereby transforms the flesh from its base materiality. The nature of embodiment is rendered semiotically, the body is a sign. That is, Israel's humanity is disclosed in the sign inscribed on the flesh of the penis. The word *adam*, therefore, applies most precisely to the male Jew, a connotation that is conveyed as well in the Aramaic idiom frequently used in the zoharic corpus, *bar nash*, which contemporary scholars have misleadingly rendered in generic terms as a reference to humanity.¹⁷⁵

the former there is no argument for an ontological difference separating Jews and non-Jews. The chosenness of Israel relates to their ethical and messianic mission to augment knowledge of the one true God in the world since the battle against idolatry is ultimately based on reason. As Kaplan, p. vi, correctly observes, Maimonides does not restrict esoteric subjects to Jews alone, a critical element in all streams of medieval kabbalah.

¹⁷¹ From the anonymous poem, *om ani homah*, included in the Ashkenazi rite for Hoshanah Rabbah, the seventh day of Sukkot. See *Maḥzor Sukkot Shemini Ašeret we-Simḥat Torah*, 176.

¹⁷² *Zohar* 3: 8a.

¹⁷³ See Wolfson, 'Circumcision and the Divine Name'.

¹⁷⁴ For an elaboration, see Wolfson, 'Circumcision, Secrecy, and the Veiling of the Veil'; id., *Language, Eros, Being*, 128–41.

¹⁷⁵ Liebes, 'Zohar and Eros', 87, n. 126, asserted that there is a unique occurrence in the early strata of zoharic literature, *Zohar* 2: 97b, wherein both the force of holiness and that of impurity are designated by the term *adam*, a usage that is found in *Tiqqunei Zohar*, the later stratum of

YHWH, PROPHECY, AND THE ANGELIC BODY OF ISRAEL

Before continuing with relevant passages from zoharic literature, I would like to consider the articulation of this mythic theme in the mystical ruminations of Abraham Abulafia, the thirteenth-century prophetic kabbalist and self-proclaimed messiah. This consideration must necessarily be brief and hence inadequate, since a satisfactory treatment of Abulafia's thought would require an excursion that would take us far from the main path of our inquiry. I am limiting my comments to a few issues that are part of a much larger and more complex web of ideas woven through the corpus of an author who is surely one of most captivating mystics in the annals of Jewish history. On balance, it would seem that Abulafia falls short of identifying humanity and the Jews in a one-to-one correspondence, as we find explicitly in other kabbalists of his time, including the authors of zoharic literature, for he embraces the philosophic classification that accords a special place for 'man' in the chain of existence, the being who has been granted the rational faculty by means of which one comes to know God.¹⁷⁶ As he puts it in one passage in *Ḥayyei ha-Olam ha-Ba*:

I will open for you chambers of the wondrous and awesome chambers, which are the mystery of the world (*kivshono shel olam*) that instruct about the secrets of the lower court (*beit din shel mattah*), which is the covenant of Abraham (*berit avraham*), as I alluded to in the secret of the archon (*sar*), which is *shin reish* (*shin yod nun reish shin*), the letters of the heart (*otiyot ha-lev*), which are the archons of the intellect (*sarei sekhel*), and they are the telos (*takhlit*) of the totality of the first created being (*kol nivra ri'shon*) and also the telos (*takhlit*) of the reality of comprehension (*meš'ut hassagah*), and this is the archon of the totality of the final human (*sar kol adam*

zoharic literature, to contrast Samael, who is referred to as the evil man (*adam beliyya'al* on the basis of Prov. 6: 12), and the holy One, the good man (*adam tov*, which is also designated by the title *yisra'el*). See *Tiqqunei Zohar*, § 67, 98b; *Zohar Ḥadash*, 106d (*Tiqqunim*). It seems to me, however, that a similar terminological application of the word *adam* to the demonic forces may be detected in *Zohar* 2: 145a. On the attribution of the term *ish* to the demonic potency as opposed to *adam*, which is associated with the divine, see *Zohar* 3: 48b. A portion of the text is cited and discussed in Wolfson, 'Light Through Darkness', 81, n. 29 and 86, n. 46. In *Zohar Ḥadash*, 54b, the word *adam* in the verse 'I give men (*adam*) in exchange for you' (Isa. 43: 4) is read exegetically as *edom*, which is identified further as the 'man from the nation of the evil side', the 'seed of Esau'. To appreciate the association of *adam* and *edom*, one must bear in mind the fuller homiletical import of the passage: the zoharic authorship makes the point that when the demonic force, represented symbolically as the serpent, sets out to punish a Jew who has sinned, God exchanges that soul (which is designated *adam*) with that of a Christian (referred to as *edom*) who can be killed by the serpent since both derive from the side of impurity.

¹⁷⁶ See e.g. Abraham Abulafia, *Ošar Eden Ganuz*, MS Oxford, Bodleian Library 1580, fols. 167a–b (printed edn., p. 374).

aḥaron), and the secret of the material of the first human (*ḥomer ha-adam ha-ri'shon*) is the generic name (*shem kelali*) for all that issues forth from his seed. Accordingly, he is the archon of the totality of the final human (*sar kol adam aḥaron*) as the soul (*nefesh*) is the generic name for every intellect (*shem kelali le-khol sekhel*).¹⁷⁷

By stringing together a number of expressions that all have the numerological value of 860, Abulafia equates the 'mystery of the world' (*kivshono shel olam*), the 'lower court' (*beit din shel maṭṭah*), the 'covenant of Abraham' (*berit avraham*), the 'archon' (*shin yod nun reish shin*), the 'letters of the heart' (*otiyot ha-lev*), the 'archons of the intellect' (*sarei sekhel*), the 'telos' (*takhlit*) of the 'totality of the first created being' (*takhlit kol nivra ri'shon*), the 'telos' (*takhlit*) of the 'reality of comprehension' (*meṣi'ut hassagah*), the 'archon of the totality of the final human' (*sar kol adam aḥaron*), the 'material of the first human' (*ḥomer ha-adam ha-ri'shon*), the universal soul that is the 'generic name for every intellect' (*shem kelali le-khol sekhel*). In line with the Maimonidean approach, Abulafia even identifies *selem elohim*, the divine image with which Adam was created, as the natural faculty of reason,¹⁷⁸ and thus it would seem that he would necessarily have to resist positing an ontological distinction between souls of pious Gentiles (*nefashot ḥasidei ha-ummot*) and souls of righteous Jews (*ṣaddiqei yisra'el*), for the former, as the latter, are immaterial intellects (*sekhelim nifradim*) capable of attaining the disembodied state of conjunction, which is designated by the traditional eschatological category of the world-to-come.¹⁷⁹ It should come as no surprise, therefore, that in the context of discussing the status of Aristotle, Abulafia states explicitly that 'every man has the holy spirit in potentiality',¹⁸⁰ a proclamation that on the face of it undermines the ontic essentialism affirmed by other kabbalists of his generation. Notwithstanding the explicit affirmation of a philosophically influenced anthropology, however, Abulafia does maintain persistently that the people of Israel are accorded a privileged rank vis-à-vis other ethnicities—

¹⁷⁷ *Ḥayyei ha-Olam ha-Ba*, MS Oxford, Bodleian Library 1582, fol. 44b (printed edn., pp. 133–4).

¹⁷⁸ Abraham Abulafia, *Geṭ ha-Shemot*, MS Oxford, Bodleian Library 1658, fol. 89b (printed edn., p. 4)

¹⁷⁹ *Ḥayyei ha-Nefesh*, MS Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek 408, fol. 50b (printed edn., p. 88); *Ḥayyei ha-Olam ha-Ba*, fol. 5a (p. 49); *Oṣar Eden Ganuz*, fol. 93a (pp. 192–3). In the matter of the pious of the nations (*ḥasidei ha-ummot*), attaining the world-to-come, Abulafia follows the opinion of Maimonides. See *Mishneh Torah*, Melakhim 8: 10–11; Twersky, *Introduction*, 455, n. 239. A faint echo of this approach is discernible in *Zohar* 2: 95b where the 'pious of the nations of the world' (*ḥasidei ummot ha-olam*) are identified as the souls who are caught on the scale that inclines in the direction of evil on account of the wrongdoing committed in the world. These souls are taken captive by the demonic side, but they wind up overpowering it, and for this reason they are granted a special status. This idea is presented in the zoharic text as an older truth derived from 'ancient treatises'.

¹⁸⁰ *Geṭ ha-Shemot*, fol. 102a (p. 31).

as he puts it in one passage, utilizing a talmudic idiom, the nations and their languages at best may be viewed as an emulation of the Jews and Hebrew in the manner that the monkey imitates the human being, though they are, according to the common wisdom of Abulafia's time, distinct species¹⁸¹—an elitist position that, in the spirit of Halevi and in opposition to Maimonides, is linked to the potentiality to attain prophecy and to the linguistic supremacy of the national tongue Hebrew, which is also the matrix language of creation.¹⁸² The letters are thus described by Abulafia as the 'force of the root of all wisdom and knowledge' and as the 'matter of prophecy', which 'are seen in the vision of prophecy as if they were thick bodies speaking to a person mouth to mouth according to the abundance of the rational image conceived in the heart of the one who speaks them, and they appear as if they are pure living angels that move them and teach them to the person'.¹⁸³

The tradition (*qabbalah*) that is distinct to the Jews, which has been received in a continuous chain from the prophets and can be traced to God, is superior to philosophical opinions based on the faculty of reason (*sekhel*) that is shared equally by all people.¹⁸⁴ As may be ascertained from Abulafia's reworking of the parable of the three rings, which circulated in medieval literature as an allegorical representation of the three Abrahamic faiths, the people of Israel are depicted as the son of the king to whom the pearl belongs exclusively. The precious stone is the sole possession of the Jews for they alone are called 'sons of God', a distinction that is related to the fact that the Torah was first revealed to them in the language that is superior to all other languages. Indeed, the parable ends with a messianic vision predicated on all people discerning the knowledge of the name, a spiritual attainment that ostensibly would result in removal of the barriers separating the different religions, but even so the distinctiveness of Hebrew as the 'chosen language' will persist.¹⁸⁵ In the time of the messiah, according to Abulafia's soteriology, Judaism itself is transformed into the 'universal religion' (*ha-dat ha-kelalit*)

¹⁸¹ *Imrei Shefer*, MS Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek 40, fol. 238a (printed edn., p. 70).

¹⁸² In *Ošar Eden Ganuz*, fol. 90a (p. 185), Abulafia raises the theoretical problems pertaining to the claim that the Jewish people is unique. On Abulafia's conception of Hebrew as the natural or essential language in contrast to the conventional status of all other languages, see Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, 58–70, and references to Scholem and Idel mentioned, *ibid.* 58, n. 163; 62, nn. 178–80; and 64, n.186.

¹⁸³ *Ḥayyei ha-Olam ha-Ba*, fol. 59a (p. 159). On the linguistic description of angels, see Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*, 245, n. 235.

¹⁸⁴ See e.g. Abraham Abulafia, *Mafteah ha-Ra'ayon*, MS Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica ebr. 291, fol. 25a (printed edn., pp. 13–14). The specific context wherein Abulafia makes this point is an affirmation of the doctrine of creation, which is set in contrast to the philosophical doctrine of eternity.

¹⁸⁵ *Or ha-Sekhel*, MS Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica ebr. 233, fols. 38b–39b (printed edn., pp. 34–5). The passage is translated and analysed in Idel, *Studies*, 48–50.

that is manifest in the 'divine overflow moving the universal speech' (*ha-shefa ha-elohi ha-mani'a ha-dibbur ha-kelali*),¹⁸⁶ an elocution that denotes not language in general or the potentiality for language as such, but rather the specific ethno-cultural linguistic comportment of the Jewish people, Hebrew, the language of creation, revelation, and redemption.

It is of interest to note here one passage in particular. Interpreting the rabbinic contrast of the prophetic vision of Moses as a seeing through a translucent speculum (*aspaqlarya me'irah*) to the vision of all other prophets as a seeing through an opaque speculum (*aspaqlarya she-einah me'irah*),¹⁸⁷ Abulafia depicts Mosaic prophecy as a seeing of the 'form of a human face' through the medium of 'pure water' or a 'lucid mirror', and the level of other prophets, applicable *in potentia* to all other Jews, as a seeing of the form in 'murky water' or an 'opaque mirror', a dream vision that is conjured in and by the imaginative faculty. After making this distinction, Abulafia addresses the status of non-Jews:

However, the rest of the human species apart from those who have been mentioned, like the masses of the nations of the world who do not observe the commandments at all, they are very much below those who have been mentioned, and they are neither human (*adam*) nor beasts (*behemot*), but demons (*shedim*) that are in existence beneath the level of human and above the level of beast.¹⁸⁸ . . . And this group (*hamin ha-zeh*)¹⁸⁹ see God through their evil imagination like one who sees the form of a human face drawn on a wall in various colors though it is a pure form (*šurat ḥalaq*), or like one who sees the image set within or protruding from a gold ring. Thus most of the nations have found it necessary to draw the sign of the existence of God, may he be blessed, from their evil imagination and from their deceptive images, on different physical forms, on wood, stone, silver, and gold, in their courtyards, villages, palaces, and their houses of idolatry, on the top of mountains and hills.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁶ *Or ha-Sekhel*, fol. 37b (p. 34).

¹⁸⁷ Babylonian Talmud, *Yevamot* 49b.

¹⁸⁸ In the section of the passage that I have not translated, Abulafia refers to the remark of Maimonides, *Guide*, I. 7, that some persons are not endowed with human form, i.e. the intellect, and thus they are animals that have the shape and configuration of a man. This person can apply perception and thought to do evil in acts imitating or resembling a human. Maimonides relates this notion to the rabbinic idea that for a period of 130 years (after the death of Abel and prior to the birth of Seth) Adam separated from Eve and begot evil spirits. Maimonides cites the dictum in the name of the 'authors of the *Midrash*', but his language is closest to the aggadic statement in Babylonian Talmud, *Eruvin* 18b. For a different version, which attributes the birth of male demons to Eve and female demons to Adam, see the tradition attributed to R. Simon in *Genesis Rabbah* 20: 11, pp. 195–6, and 24: 6, p. 236.

¹⁸⁹ Here I have followed the reading in the manuscript rather than the printed text, which reads *ha-hamon ha-zeh*, 'these masses'. For references, see following note.

¹⁹⁰ *Hayyei ha-Nefesh*, fol. 51b (p. 89).

In this rather remarkable passage Abulafia sets the true prophecy of the Jewish people in opposition to the false prophecy of the idolatrous nations. From the end of the citation it is clear that Abulafia, echoing a standard polemical trope in medieval rabbinic sources, utilizes the expression ‘idolatrous nations’ as an encoded reference to Christianity.¹⁹¹ The ultimate object of prophetic vision is the image of a human form, but there are three different ways that this form is envisioned, which correspond to three types of human beings related symbolically by Abulafia to the three sons of Noah—the sons of Shem are branded as angels (*mal’akhim*), the sons of Yafet as human beings (*anashim*), and the sons of Ham as demons (*shedim*)—to the three books opened before God on Rosh ha-Shanah, one for the completely righteous, a second for the intermediaries, and the third for those who are completely wicked,¹⁹² and to the three groups of angels who utter the threefold Sanctus before God.¹⁹³ The highest level, attained by Moses, involves seeing the form through a transparent medium; the next level, which potentially encompasses all other Jews, is seeing the form through an obscure medium; the lowest level, which is achieved by the nations who do not have Torah, is a more concrete seeing of that form through the evil imagination. Lest the irony be lost on the reader, let me note that the nations that promote visible representations of God on material surfaces as human (an obvious reference to iconic depictions of Christ) are judged to be less than fully human.¹⁹⁴ Gentile visionaries are

¹⁹¹ Idel, *Studies*, 54, cites a passage from Abulafia’s *Sitrei Torah* according to which Jesus is identified as the ‘alien god’, a secret supported by the numerical equivalence of the expressions *yeshu* and *elohei nekhar*. On the idolatrous status of Christianity in medieval halakhic rulings, see Katz, *Tradition*, 19–20, 34–6; id., *Exclusiveness and Tolerance*, 22–3. See further references cited below, n. 194. A notable exception is the remark of the medieval *Tosafot*, Avodah Zarah, 2a, s.v., *asur lase’t we-latet immahem*, that the ‘idolaters’, literally, ‘worshippers of the stars and zodiac signs’ (*ovdei kokhavim u-mazzalot*), in their midst were not considered to be practising worship of the stars (*avodat kokhavim*). See Funkenstein, *Perceptions*, 171. As is known, Menahem Meiri also took issue with the identification of Christianity as an idolatrous religion; see Blidstein, ‘Menahem Meiri’s Attitude’, 119–33; Bleich, ‘Divine Unity’, 242–7.

¹⁹² Babylonian Talmud, Rosh ha-Shanah 16b.

¹⁹³ *Hayyei ha-Nefesh*, fols. 51b–52a (p. 90).

¹⁹⁴ Abulafia’s polemical comments fit into the pattern of medieval Jewish reactions to the overt visible representations of Christianity that Jews constantly had to confront and in virtue of which this religion was considered to be tantamount to idolatry. See references to Katz cited above, n. 191, as well as Abulafia, *Christians and Jews*, 70–1; Blidstein, ‘Menahem Meiri’s Attitude’, 128–30. On the characterization of Christianity as idolatrous in Jewish and Muslim polemic against the Christian faith, see Hawting, *Idea of Idolatry*, 76–8, 82–5. The charge that Jews despise the veneration of images is a much older polemical tactic utilized by Christian authors, as is the rejoinder on the part of Jews that Christians worship iconic representations of God and especially the crucified Christ. See Krauss, *Jewish-Christian Controversy*, 20, 65, 69, 73, 84, 85, 203. On Abulafia’s polemical stance vis-à-vis the messianic claims of Christianity, see Idel, *Studies*, 45–61, and the pertinent remarks regarding Abulafia’s overall messianic mission as an expression of the spiritual struggle between Judaism and Christianity in id., *Messianic*

accorded the status of demons (*shedim*), situated between the human condition (*adam*) applied most accurately to Jews and the beastly condition (*behemah*) attributed to non-Jews.¹⁹⁵ As Abulafia puts it in *Gan Na'ul*:

We find that there are three things that separate (*mavddilim*) . . . and they are God (*elohim*), the firmament (*raqi'a*), and man (*adam*). One must know this from the Torah, which says concerning the firmament 'that it may separate' (Gen. 1: 6), and concerning God 'God separated' (Gen. 1: 4), and concerning man, which refers to Israel alone, as it says 'For you, my flock, that I tend are men' (Ezek. 34: 31), you are men but the nations are not men (*attem adam we-lo ha-goyyim adam*), and this is the secret of 'Let us make man' (Gen. 1: 26), for the rest are beasts, living creatures, and birds. They are called by the name human (*adam*) equivocally (*be-shittuf ha-shem*) and through an inversion of the matter equivocally by the name 'living' (*u-ve-hilluf ha-inyan be-shittuf shem hai*). Thus Israel is separated (*muvddalim*) from the nations as it says 'I will separate (*wa-avddil*) you from the nations to be mine' (Lev. 20: 26), and it says 'you shall be my treasured possession amongst the nations, for all the earth is mine' (Exod. 19: 5). They alone are the ones who separate (*mavddilim*) as it says 'So you shall set apart the clean beast from the unclean, the unclean bird from the clean. You shall not draw abomination upon yourselves through beast or bird or anything with which the ground is alive, which I have set apart for you to treat as unclean (Lev. 20: 25), and it says 'These are the instructions concerning animals, birds, all living creatures that move in water, and all creatures that swarm on earth, for distinguishing between the unclean and the clean, between the living things that may be eaten and the living things that may not be eaten' (Lev. 11: 46–47).¹⁹⁶

The hierarchy of human attainment is laid out plainly by Abulafia in a passage from *Imrei Shefer*. The context wherein Abulafia's comment appears is his affirmation of an archaic root of Jewish esotericism concerning the link between the secret of circumcision and knowledge of the Tetragrammaton:¹⁹⁷ 'The explicit name (*ha-shem ha-meforash*) is the soul of Israel, and Israel the soul of the seventy nations . . . the nations are the soul of every irrational living being, and the living being a soul for the vegetative, and the vegetative a soul

Mystics, 62, 97–9. The explicit criticisms of Christian beliefs notwithstanding, on numerous occasions Abulafia appropriated Christological language to formulate what he considered to be the esoteric truths of Judaism. See Scholem, *Major Trends*, 129; Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, 131–3, n. 99; 188–9, n. 26.

¹⁹⁵ The distinction between 'human' (*adam*) and 'beast' (*behemah*) seems to be applied to different groups within the Jewish community in *Hayyei ha-Olam ha-Ba*, fol. 46a (p. 136). Utilizing the standard philosophic idea that man is distinguished from the animal on the basis of the faculty of speech (*dibbur*), the 'human' is identified by Abulafia as someone who possesses knowledge of Hebrew, the privileged language, whereas the 'beast' lacks this comprehension. See Ch. 2, n. 184. In *Mafteah ha-Shemot*, p. 131, Abulafia polemically renders the Christian notion of *corpus domini* (according to his exact rendering *domines*), the "body of God," as *corpus demonaeos*, that is, the "demonic body," which he translates into the Hebrew idiom *gufei ha-shedim*.

¹⁹⁶ *Gan Na'ul*, MS Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek 58, fol. 36a (printed edn., pp. 32–3).

¹⁹⁷ I have translated this passage in *Abraham Abulafia*, 89.

for every inanimate being, and the inanimate being has no soul.¹⁹⁸ Predictably, the ontic issue is cast in another passage from the same work in decidedly linguistic terms: ‘Know that if all the languages are conventional (*heskemiyyot*), the holy language is natural (*ṭiv’it*) . . . for it is not possible that there not be a natural language (*lashon ṭiv’it*) whence all the languages derive, and it is like the matter for all of them, nor is it possible that there not be a natural script (*mikhtav ṭiv’i*) whence all scripts emerge in the image of the primal Adam from whom all human beings were created.’¹⁹⁹ Just as Hebrew is the ‘natural language’, that is, the language of creation that is the basis for all other languages,²⁰⁰ which, by contrast, are deemed to be ‘conventional’, so the Jewish people represent the ethnicity that embodies the human ideal most fully. This standing is connected more specifically to their possession of the divine name, which is expressed somatically as the inscription of the sign/letter of the covenant on the male organ²⁰¹ and psychically as the envisioning

¹⁹⁸ Abraham Abulafia, *Imrei Shefer*, fol. 232a (pp. 48–9). Cf. the formulation in id., *Oṣar Eden Ganuz*, fols. 35b–36a (pp. 72–3). In that context, the distinctiveness of the four letters of the name vis-à-vis the other letters of the Hebrew alphabet is compared to the chosenness of the Jewish people vis-à-vis the other nations.

¹⁹⁹ *Imrei Shefer*, fol. 237b (pp. 67–8).

²⁰⁰ A lucid statement of this belief is offered by Abulafia in *Ḥayyei ha-Nefesh*, fol. 37b (p. 67): ‘Know that the twenty-two holy letters found in our hands today, as they were transmitted to us in a tradition from generation to generation, are the letters upon which all languages are built.’ See also *Mafteah ha-Ra’ayon*, fol. 29b (p. 24): ‘Our language is superior to every language . . . and therefore it is called the holy language (*leshon ha-qodesh*) . . . And all the nations offers this testimony in relation to us just as they attest as well that our nation preceded every nation, not in existence but in stature.’ See *ibid.*, printed edn., pp. 42–3. On the inclusion of the seventy languages in Hebrew, see *Geṭ ha-Shemot*, fol. 105b (p. 38); and see below, n. 207. For a later articulation that resonates with Abulafia’s view, see the work that some scholars have attributed to the eighteenth-century figure Jonathan Eybeschuetz, *Shem Olam*, 10. After having articulated the long-standing kabbalistic belief that the soul of man is ‘light composed from the letters’ of the Hebrew alphabet, the author of this text addresses the question of the status of the soul of the non-Jew: ‘Know that in all of the shells (*qelippot*) the sparks of holiness (*neṣoṣei qedushshah*) have fallen, and they were minimally abrogated within the shell (*nitbaṭṭelu be-mi’utan be-tokh ha-qelippah*), and this is the holy language (*leshon qodesh*), which is the essence of the holy chariot (*iqqar merkavah qedushshah*), and the other languages are the shell . . . and corresponding to the division of the archons and shells is the variation of languages . . . and in all of them there is a mixture of the holy language (*ta’aroret leshon ha-qodesh*) in accord with the holy sparks that are in them, whether abundantly or diminutively, and from these letters are produced the names of the idolatrous nations.’

²⁰¹ On the nexus between circumcision and intellectual conjunction, which is expressed mystically as cleaving to the name, see Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, 87–90, 194–5, 216–20. To the sources mentioned there, see also the passage from *Oṣar Eden Ganuz* mentioned below, n. 210. My interpretation of Abulafia stands in marked contrast to the more abstract and disembodied approach of Idel. See e.g. Idel, ‘“The Time of the End”’, 172: ‘It would not be surprising to assume that the term Jew was understood by Abulafia as an allegory for the perfect knowledge of the divine name.’ I would certainly concur that, for Abulafia, the essence of being Jewish is tied to knowledge of the divine names, and especially the Tetragrammaton, but if what is implied in Idel’s remark is an allegorical understanding that would divest being Jewish of concrete ritual

of the name in the imaginal form of the divine anthropos.²⁰² This possession, which Abulafia and other kabbalists considered unique to the Jewish people, facilitates the actualization of their angelic potentiality.²⁰³

It is incumbent upon me to note that even in passages where Abulafia ostensibly embraces the philosophical anthropology of Maimonides, careful scrutiny reveals that he reinterprets the latter in a manner that shows greater affinity with the particularism of the esoteric tradition than with the universalism of medieval rationalism. Thus, to cite one of numerous possible examples, in the context of describing the unique status of the human being (*adam*) vis-à-vis other species, Abulafia duly notes that the distinguishing mark of *homo sapiens* is linked to the fact that a person can think (*maskil*) and speak (*medabber*).²⁰⁴ In the continuation of this discussion, Abulafia states (echoing the language of *Sefer Yesirah*) that ‘there is no speech (*dibbur*) in man apart from the twenty-two holy letters and apart from the five movements that move them in the five places of the mouth’.²⁰⁵ To be sure, as I have already noted in passing, Abulafia does affirm that all the languages are contained in the Hebrew letters and hence one can speak of the manifold forms of speech ensuing therefrom,²⁰⁶ an idea expressed in the numerological equivalence of the expressions *seruf ha-otiyot*, ‘permutation of the letters’, and *shiv'im leshonot*, ‘seventy languages’.²⁰⁷ This does not, however, alter the fact that he privileged Hebrew of all the languages such that speech in its most perfect form—whether mental, oral, or graphic—is a unique cultural possession of the Jews amongst all the nations of the world. Having rendered the

embodiment, which includes being part of the community, then I would take issue with such a presentation. See discussion above, n. 194.

²⁰² See the Abulafian text translated and analysed by Scholem, *Major Trends*, 136–8 (see, however, *ibid.* 133, where Scholem concluded that ‘Abulafia believes that whoever succeeds in making this great Name of God, the least concrete and perceptible thing in the world, the object of his meditation, is on the way to true mystical ecstasy’); Idel, *Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, 95–100, 103–4; Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, 167, n. 197, 208.

²⁰³ For a preliminary discussion of this enormously important theme, see Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, 65–8. In *Hayyei ha-Olam ha-Ba*, fol. 6b (p. 53), Abulafia depicts the ontic difference between Jew and non-Jew in terms of the rabbinic legend that the Sinaitic theophany resulted in the removal of the filth with which the primordial serpent inseminated Eve from the Jews in contrast to the other nations (see above, n. 104). Abulafia discusses this older legend under the rubric of *sitrei arayot*, the ‘secrets of illicit sexual relations’, one of the three subjects considered esoteric by some in the rabbinic academy. For an extensive analysis of *sitrei arayot* in Abulafia’s writings, see Idel, ‘Kabbalistic Interpretation’, 155–85.

²⁰⁴ *Mafteah ha-Ra'ayon*, fol. 26b (p. 17).

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, fol. 27b (p. 18).

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, printed edn., p. 38. The manuscripts of this work that I was able to examine do not have this material.

²⁰⁷ *Or ha-Sekhel*, fol. 89a (p. 85); *Imrei Shefer*, fol. 271b (p. 185); *Oṣar Eden Ganuz*, fols. 37b (p. 77), 140a (p. 313), 170b (p. 381); *Sheva Netivot ha-Torah*, 4.

philosophical position in ethnocentric terms, it comes as no surprise that he concludes: 'There is no intellect in man without speech, and there is no understanding of speech without knowledge of the secrets.'²⁰⁸ That is to say, without knowledge of the Hebrew letters, which comprise the essence of Torah, there is no knowledge of the secrets, and without knowledge of the secrets there is no conjunction with the Active Intellect, no receiving of the intellectual overflow of the holy spirit. One cannot attain the level of prophecy (*ma'alat ha-nevu'ah*) unless one has received the tradition concerning the knowledge of the name (*qabbalat yedi'at ha-shem*), but only the one who is circumcised in the flesh can be a recipient of this gnosis.²⁰⁹

The special status of circumcision and esoteric knowledge of the name is a motif affirmed in a number of passages in Abulafia's corpus, as we find, for example, in the following text from *Oṣar Eden Ganuz*: 'Thus it was appropriate to make the covenant of circumcision (*berit milah*) with us... the physical covenant (*berit ha-gufanit*), and to cleave to the spiritual from it (*u-lehiddabeq ba-ruḥanit mimmenah*), which is knowledge of the name (*yedi'at ha-shem*).'²¹⁰ Similarly, in *Imrei Shefer* Abulafia reiterates the point:

Thus Abraham our patriarch, the beginning for every master of the covenant (*ba'al berit*), was circumcised in the commandments of God, and since there is in the secret of the covenant of circumcision a first principle concerning the knowledge of the instruction about the explicit name (*iqqar eḥad ri'shon li-yedi'at hora'at ha-shem ha-meforash*), it is written, 'the secret of the Lord is for those who fear him, and to them he makes his covenant known' (Ps. 55: 14), and this secret is revealed from the words *eser sefirot belimah*.²¹¹

The burden of circumcision as the cultural marker of identity as well as the contextualization of the the covenant of the one (*berit yaḥid*), or the covenant of unity (*berit yiḥud*), according to a passage in *Sefer Yeṣirah* in the covenant of the tongue (*milat lashon*) and in the covenant of the foreskin (*milat ma'or*) forged the thematic bond between esotericism and phallo-eroticism.²¹² It is

²⁰⁸ *Mafteah ha-Ra'ayon*, fol. 28a (p. 21).

²⁰⁹ *Imrei Shefer*, fol. 226b (p. 29).

²¹⁰ *Oṣar Eden Ganuz*, fol. 130a (p. 286).

²¹¹ *Imrei Shefer*, fol. 231b (p. 48).

²¹² One has to marvel at the rather strident attack by Idel, 'Kabbalistic Interpretation', 182, n. 649, on my claim that Abulafia, together with other kabbalists, links the issue of esotericism to the phallus. Idel wonders if I think that 'every esoteric matter has to be connected to the phallus'. He goes so far as to say my assertion is a 'gross exaggeration'. There is nothing in my work that would suggest that I think every esoteric matter has to be connected to the phallus; in fact, I see no inherent link between phallocentrism and esotericism in general terms, and what is a gross exaggeration is Idel's presentation of my scholarly views since what I do claim is that the Jewish esoteric tradition, and especially the medieval form of kabbalah, evolved in such a manner that this nexus was viewed as necessary. The intrinsic connection of the two covenants, which is the

precisely because Abulafia categorically did not reject the literal circumcision of the flesh that one cannot sever the connection between *berit lashon* and *berit ma'or* in his thought, even though he affirms the superiority of the former over the latter.²¹³ As he puts it in *Mafteah ha-Ra'ayon*:

The intention of creation (*kawwanat ha-berī'ah*) was not complete until after the giving of Torah, and similarly the [human] creature was not complete until he circumcised himself and removed the foreskin from himself. And [in this act] two covenants are comprised (*shetei beritot kelulot*), the covenant of circumcision to perfect the formation of the attributes of the body (*middot ha-guf*) and the covenant of the tongue to perfect the formation of the attributes of the soul (*middot ha-nefesh*). The covenant of circumcision in perfection came to us by means of Abraham our patriarch, and the covenant of the tongue [came to us] in perfection by means of Moses our master.²¹⁴

The rite of circumcision, which perfects the human creature (and obviously in this context the reference can only be to the Jewish male), comprises the two covenants mentioned in *Sefer Yeširah*, the covenant of the foreskin, which is associated with Abraham, and the covenant of the tongue, which is associated with Moses.²¹⁵ The phallogocentric dimension is underscored in the continuation of the passage when Abulafia remarks that those 'who are included in the ones circumcised in the commandments of Torah' (*mi-khelal ha-nimolim be-mišwot ha-torah*)—and surely only one who bears the covenantal mark on the phallus could be included in this category—have the 'eyes of the heart' capable of apprehending the divine light. The anti-Christian slant of Abulafia's position underscores his interpretation of the verse 'And

ideational basis for the phallogocentric understanding of esotericism that has prevailed in the manifest forms of kabbalistic expression, is stated clearly by Elijah de Vidas, *Re'shit Hōkhmah*, Sha'ar ha-Qedushshah, ch. 11, 2: 259–62: 'There are two covenants corresponding one to another: the covenant of the tongue (*berit ha-lashon*) and the covenant of the foreskin (*berit ha-ma'or*), and just as with respect to the covenant of the foreskin the one who emits semen in vain is called "evil", so with respect to the covenant of the tongue, the one who emits a word in vain is like the one who emits semen in vain... Guarding the phallus (*shemirat ha-berit*) is dependent on guarding the tongue (*shemirat ha-lashon*) for they are two corresponding covenants.' The phallogocentric orientation is captured succinctly in the following remark of Jonathan Eybeschuetz, *Ya'arot Devash*, 1: 216: 'The delight of Israel and all their desire is in the holy covenant, which is the seal of the Lord guarding Israel in this and the next [worlds]... the seal of Israel is the sign of the holy covenant.' On the ascetic ideal of guarding the two covenants, the covenant of the tongue and the covenant of the foreskin, see *ibid.* 1: 330.

²¹³ A point acknowledged by Idel, 'Kabbalistic Interpretation', 167, n. 554. Idel also suggested that Abulafia's insistence on preserving the circumcision of the flesh may be a concealed polemic with Christianity, a point that concurs with my own analysis.

²¹⁴ *Mafteah ha-Ra'ayon*, fol. 25b (p. 14).

²¹⁵ On the two covenants and their respective correlation with Abraham and Moses, see *Ošar Eden Ganuz*, fols. 129b–130a (pp. 285–6), partially translated and analysed in *Language, Eros, Being*, 139–40.

you shall circumcise the foreskin of your hearts' (Deut. 10: 16), 'for it mediates between the covenants. The head is created from fire in which is the covenant of the tongue, and the stomach is created from water, which is the covenant of circumcision, and the body is created from spirit in which is the covenant of Torah, the life and sustenance in the faculty of the heart.'²¹⁶ Circumcision of the heart does not replace circumcision of the flesh, but rather it serves as the mediation between the covenant of the foreskin and the covenant of the tongue. One who is not corporeally branded by the former cannot attain the spiritual perfection of the latter, and hence the light of God is not perceptible except to the eyes of the heart of one who is circumcised.

Given the importance of this idea for a proper understanding of the phallogocentric implications of Abulafia's mystical insight, I will cite another passage that illustrates the point:

The covenant of the one (*berit yaḥid*) is set in the middle in two places in the body, the one from which he is created, and this is the limb that is distinguished for the preservation of the species, to guard the fruit, and it is inscribed in the phallus (*we-hursham bi-verit*), and it is a sign for the Sabbath... And it also attests in a more enduring testimony that it is the covenant of the tongue (*berit lashon*), and it is above the covenant of circumcision (*berit milah*) in place and stature. If not for the covenant of circumcision, the covenant of the tongue could not exist, and if not for the covenant of the tongue, there would be no existence for the covenant of circumcision. Thus the secret of *ten sefirot belimah* is *eser sof berit milah*.²¹⁷

In spite of Abulafia's more universalistic tendencies, indebted in great measure to the influence of Maimonides, he could not liberate himself from the weight of the esoteric tradition that laid its foundation on the distinctiveness

²¹⁶ *Mafteah ha-Ra'ayon*, fols. 25b–26a (p. 15). See also *Ḥayyei ha-Olam ha-Ba*, fols. 28b–29b (pp. 107–9): 'The blood attests that the foundation of the man is the blood, and this is the blood of circumcision, as they say concerning the blood of Passover (*dam pesah*) and the blood of circumcision (*dam milah*)... The blood of the masculine (*dam ha-zakhar*) is superior in the secret of the mouth that speaks (*peh saḥ*) and the blood of the feminine (*dam ha-neqevah*) is in the image of the blood of circumcision (*ki-demut dam milah*).' In the continuation of the passage, circumcision of the heart is connected to the comprehension of the 'secret of the rotation of the letters and their reversal' (*sod gilgul ha-otiyot we-hippukham*), which is depicted further as the exclusive worship of God.

²¹⁷ *Oṣar Eden Ganuz*, fol. 4b (p. 9). Cf. the comment in *Maṣref la-Kesef we-Khur la-Zahav*, appended to the printed edition of *Ḥayyei ha-Nefesh*, p. 3: 'It is correct to count the first *sefirah*, together with the second and third, according to the order set by the author of *Sefer Yeṣirah*, which consists of the thirty-two wondrous paths of wisdom, the ten inscrutable enumerations (*sefirot belimah*) and the twenty-two foundational letters (*otiyot yesod*)... *Yesod* is mentioned together with *belimah* on account of the fact that the foundation is in the [place of] circumcision (*yesod be-milah*) by way of "The secret of the Lord is for those who fear him, to inform them of his covenant" (*sod yhwḥ lire'av u-verito lehodi'am*) (Ps. 25: 14), (*lehodi'am*) numerically [is equal to] *yesod milah*. And, similarly, *sefirot belimah* numerically equals *sot berit milah*, and *sot* alludes to *Ḥokhmah* and *Binah*, the two *sefirot* that proceed from *Keter Elyon*.'

of the Jew linked to circumcision of the flesh, the ritual basis for the phallogocentric bias of medieval kabbalists.²¹⁸ Thus, in another passage, Abulafia emphasizes that the ‘new covenant (*berit ḥadashah*) that was unique to Abraham and his descendants comprised two, and they are the covenant of circumcision (*berit milah*) and the covenant of the tongue (*berit lashon*)... the sign of the covenant of circumcision is with every Jewish male (*ot berit milah im kol bar yisra’el*), revealed to himself and hidden from others (*nigleh le-ašmo we-ne’elam mi-zulato*)’.²¹⁹ Insofar as the two covenants are intricately connected, it is not possible for one to attain the covenant of the tongue without the covenant of the phallus, and since mystical gnosis consists of knowledge of the twenty-two Hebrew letters, which are an expression of the covenant of the tongue, it is reasonable to conclude that, for Abulafia, one who is not circumcised cannot apprehend the secret of the name.

I cite here one other intriguing passage from Abulafia that affirms the process of angelic transformation exclusive to the Jew of which I have spoken above. The specific context whence the extract is derived is the correlation of the four visages of the beasts described by Ezekiel in his vision of the chariot, human, lion, ox, and eagle, and the four kingdoms of the wise, wealthy, courageous, and prideful:

However, one who has already separated from these four kingdoms and who has comprehended the four sections (*parshiyot*) corresponding to them, and who has been crowned by them and who is covered within them, and they have become for him the brain, heart, and liver, is called ‘god’ (*elohim*), and he is a prophet who sits on the throne of the Lord like Solomon, Moses, Abraham, and Aaron, and others like them, who were crowned in the crown of circumcision (*keter ha-milah*), and they revealed the corona (*aṭarah*), and they publicized the dominion of Judaism (*malkhut ha-yahadut*) in Abraham, the crown of Torah (*keter ha-torah*) in Moses, the crown of

²¹⁸ The attempt on the part of Idel, ‘Kabbalistic Interpretation’, 180–1, to replace the phallogocentric orientation of Abulafia and other kabbalists by noting their fascination with envisioning the head or face betrays a fundamental lack of theoretical sophistication in dealing with the erotically charged symbolism of the kabbalah; indeed, it is not even clear to me that Idel understands the term ‘phallogocentrism’ properly, as is evident, for instance, in his citation of a passage from Abulafia’s *Ḥayyei ha-Olam ha-Ba* that does not mention the phallus as a proof against my interpretation (ibid. 177–8). Ascribing phallogocentrism to an author does not mean that there is never any reference to other parts of the body or that the phallus must be mentioned explicitly in every context; what it does intend is that the phallus is the semiotic marker whence a particular socio-cultural construction of the body is conceived. Moreover, as I have shown in a number of studies, for the male kabbalists the head or face can serve as a symbolic displacement of the phallus, but even if one were not prepared to accept this claim, the phallogocentrism is hardly minimized when kabbalists insist that only one with a circumcised phallus can behold the face or gaze at the head. This is the essential point repeatedly missed by Idel and others who have been quick to criticize or to dismiss my work.

²¹⁹ *Oṣar Eden Ganuz*, fol. 129a (p. 284).

priesthood (*keter kehunah*) in Aaron, and the crown of kingship of wealth and governance (*keter malkhut ha-osher we-ha-memshalah*) in Solomon. Regarding this man it is said 'on the image of the throne was the image of the appearance of man from above' (Ezek. 1: 26). In his image, he resembles him (*bi-demuto mitddammeh lo*), and his appearance is the appearance of the image of the glory of the Lord. And he sees himself in the speculum that is translucent to the eyes and to the heart, and there is the internal Urim and Thumim. The external ones are called by the same name, but they are the speculum that does not shine. Know this and understand it well.²²⁰

Knowledge of the name allows for discarding the material body, a divestiture that is the necessary prerequisite for attaining the state of *devequt*, conjunction with the divine, restoration of the branch to the root, reintegration of the spark to the flame, an experience that is formulated in the above citation in the image of the four sections by which one is crowned and covered, language that calls to mind the ritual of donning the head and arm phylacteries.²²¹ Abulafia adds the liver, reflecting thereby a view traceable to medical works of antiquity that the liver, brain, and heart (and, in some authors, the testicles) are the principal members of the human anatomy.²²² The presentation of Abulafia's views in this way significantly narrows the gap separating him and zoharic kabbalists with regard to the conception of human nature that is most fully realized in the embodied polity of Israel.²²³ The morphological delineation of kabbalah in any historical context, which alone can be the standard by which to measure the legitimacy and relevance of the typological taxonomy of contemporary scholarly conventions, requires one to take into account such matters, for only by considering these will one be attuned to the epistemological assumptions that inform the hermeneutical presuppositions that shape a particular mystic's experience of the world. In an effort to illustrate this attunement in the prophetic kabbalah embraced by

²²⁰ *Imrei Shefer*, fol. 248a (pp. 104–5).

²²¹ On the mystical significance of the phylacteries, see Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, 149–50, n. 153, 194–5, 223–4.

²²² Jacquart and Thomasset, *Sexuality and Medicine in the Middle Ages*, 33–4. And see the passage from the fourteenth-century medical doctor Mondino de' Luzzi cited by Jacquart and Thomasset, *ibid.* 43, according to which the heart, liver, and brain are classified as 'the members in the upper parts of the body'.

²²³ The tendency in modern scholarship has been to draw a sharp contrast between zoharic kabbalah and Abulafia. See e.g. Scholem, *Major Trends*, 130. Reacting to the hypothesis of Landauer that Abulafia is the author of the *Zohar*, Scholem wrote: 'The truth is that no two things could be more different than the outlook of the Zohar and that of Abulafia.' The detailed studies on Abulafia and ecstatic-prophetic kabbalah produced by Idel have followed this approach. While I would not deny the critical differences between the kabbalistic ideas expressed in zoharic literature and the texts of prophetic kabbalah, I contend that on certain fundamental points there may be more agreement than is usually acknowledged. The example of the attitude toward the special rank of the Jewish people vis-à-vis the other nations as the ones who bear the mark of God on their flesh and are thus capable of attaining an angelic state is a case in point.

Abulafia, I will cite a representative passage from *Oṣar Eden Ganuz*, his expansive commentary on *Sefer Yeṣirah*, which portrays the sanctity of the Jewish people in terms of the mystical ideal of a people who embody the name in their flesh. In response to his own query why Israel of all the nations was invested with the obligation to set off sacred times, to which Abulafia refers by the word *qedushshot*, ‘sanctifications’, for these times are established by intentional acts of sanctification based on eyewitness testimony and reasoned judgement, he writes:

Because of the soul (*nefesh*), which is third to the world and year, and she is threefold in her holiness (*meshulleshet bi-qedushshatah*), for she possesses three forms in the image of ‘holy (*qadosh*), holy (*qadosh*), holy (*qadosh*)’ (Isa. 6: 3), for they are three entities separate from one another in reality (*sheloshah devarim nifradin zeh mi-zeh bi-meṣi’ut*), although the three are also one entity in form (*sheloshtan eḥad be-ṣurah*). Hence, Israel consists of three groups in the image of the holiness, ‘for all the community are holy, all of them, and in their midst is the Lord’ (Num. 16: 3). Indeed, with respect to the Israelites in general, each and every one of them is holy, and with respect to the Levites, each and every one of them is holy, and with respect to the Priests, each and every one of them is holy. . . . Their secret is *yehudi levi kohen*, their first letters are inverted and the last letters in order, and this is *keli yayin*, and this is an allusion to the wine preserved in its grapes from the six days of creation.²²⁴ The grapes refer to all humanity from whom God chose these ones, and they are the fruit that ‘gladdens God and mankind’ (Judg. 9: 13), for if not for this fruit, Adam would not have been created, and in their midst is the explication of the explicit name (*shem hameforash meforash*), and thus constantly draw it down to your heart. . . . The moon, which is the lesser light, and the sun, which is the bigger light, are in the image of Moses and Aaron, and Miriam is with the people, and she is the image of holy women. Even so, the sanctifications (*qedushshot*) are in their perfection. The sages have already alluded to what I have said in the secret of holiness (*sod qedushshah*).²²⁵ They said,

²²⁴ Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 99a. As Ginzberg, *Legends*, 5: 29, n. 79, intuited, the Jewish eschatological image of the wine stored up for the time-to-come seems to have influenced the formulation of the words attributed to Jesus in Matt. 26: 29 (in that context, one should recall, the wine is also identified as the ‘blood of the covenant’ that is poured out as a means of atonement for human transgression). The formulation of Matthew is particularly close to the language of the Targum on Eccles. 9: 7, which was also noted by Ginzberg. In that source, God says to the righteous that in the future they will eat of the bread that they gave to the needy and desolate, and they will drink of the wine that has been hidden for them in the Garden of Eden. See also the interesting observation of Ginzberg, *Legends*, 5: 98, n. 70, that the rabbinic legend concerning the wine of paradise preserved for the pious is probably related to the view that the grape was the very fruit that brought sin into the world. Ginzberg duly notes the Christological form of this legend in a number of sources. The eschatological reward comes by way of the very thing that caused suffering in the first place.

²²⁵ The contemporary editor of the text (see below, n. 229), Amnon Gross, has here restored in square brackets the word *meshuleshet*, which should be rendered as ‘threefold’. While thematically this restoration is surely pertinent and reasonable, I do not see any textual justification for it on the basis of the extant manuscripts.

‘R. Ishmael²²⁶ said: “There are three groups of ministering angels, one says ‘holy’, another says ‘holy, holy’, and one says ‘holy, holy, holy’.”²²⁷ It is known that Jonathan ben Uziel already explained the secret of the three worlds by way of the tradition (*al derekh ha-qabbalah*) when he said ‘they received one from the other, and they said “holy” in the exalted heavens, the dwelling of his presence (*beit shekhinteih*), and “holy” on earth, the work of his power (*avid gevertaih*), and “holy” for eternity (*le’olam u-le’olmei almayya*).’²²⁸ The secret concerning them is that the world of the intelligible (*olam muskkal*) is the world of elements (*olam ha-yesodot*), the world of the intelligible and intellection (*olam muskkal u-maskkil*) is the world of the heavenly spheres (*olam ha-galalim*), and the world of the intelligible, intellection, and intellect (*olam muskkal u-maskkil we-sekheh*) is the world of the angels (*olam ha-mal’akhim*). In their pattern, the liver grows, the heart grows and is animated, and the brain grows, is animated, and speaks. The liver is thus the master of knowledge (*ba’al da’at*), for it is the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, good because it grows and evil because it does not feel or speak. The heart is the master of understanding (*ba’al binah*) and it is the Tree of Life, for it grows and is animate, that is, it feels and understands. The essence of the body (*kelal ha-guf*) is the garden. The brain is master of wisdom (*ba’al hokhmah*) and it is Eden, for it grows, is animate, and speaks. Thus, the heart knows and understands, but the brain knows, understands, and is wise. In the perfect man (*ish ha-shalem*) whose intellect has been actualized, his liver, heart, and head, that is, brain, are one thing until the vegetative soul and the master of knowledge (*ba’alat ha-da’at*) discerns, knows, understands, and comprehends to govern her matter according to God and not according to nature alone. The efflux overflows from the world of angels to the world of heavenly spheres and from the world of heavenly spheres to the world of humanity until the point that the universal particular (*ha-meyuhad ha-kelali*) becomes intellectualized in actuality. Analogously, the verbal, rational overflow (*ha-shefa ha-sikhli ha-devari*) that is in the brain overflows from the head to the heart and from the heart to the liver.²²⁹

In this most extraordinary text Abulafia formulated the basic ontological and epistemological premises of the kabbalah he received and promulgated. Although it is tempting to wander onto any of the divergent paths traversed by Abulafia’s restless mind, I will keep the focus on the central issue of this chapter and explore briefly the way he depicts Israel vis-à-vis the nations of the world. The key point whence the many themes mentioned in the wide-

²²⁶ In the printed text, the editor has suggested that the reading in the manuscript ‘R. Ishmael’ should be changed to ‘R. Hananel in the name of Rav’, which is the attribution of a similar tradition in Babylonian Talmud, *Hullin* 91*b*. This emendation, however, is not necessary, since the source that Abulafia had in mind was not the talmudic text but a passage from *Heikhalot Rabbati* where the dictum is, in fact, attributed to R. Ishmael. For reference, see following note.

²²⁷ *Synopse zur Hekhalot Literature*, § 197.

²²⁸ Targum Jonathan on Isa. 6: 3, where the seraphim are described as calling one to the other ‘Holy, holy, holy! The Lord of hosts! His presence fills all the earth.’

²²⁹ *Oṣar Eden Ganuz*, fols. 95*a*–95*b* (pp. 199–200).

ranging homily emerge and to which they return is the notion of the threefold, as the many intersecting ideas find their coherence and connection dependent on speculation regarding this topic, which occupies a prominent and intricate place in Abulafia's thinking.²³⁰ The issue of sanctification of time, that is, of determining sacred times on the Jewish calendar, is tied to the threefold, for the scriptural foundation of holiness is based on the triple occurrence of the word 'holy' in the praising of the glory by the seraphim (Isa. 6: 3). The soul is characterized by this triadic unity as well, for there are three major organs unified in the actualized intellect of the perfect man, the brain or head, the heart, and the liver, identified respectively as the seat of wisdom (*ḥokhmah*), understanding (*binah*), and knowledge (*da'at*).²³¹ These correspond, in turn, to the three worlds that Abulafia adopted from Maimonidean cosmology, the upper world of angels (or separate intellects), the middle world of heavenly spheres, and the lower world of terrestrial elements. The threefold holiness is linked to the soul because, according to the esoteric gnosis transmitted in the second part of *Sefer Yeşirah*, each of the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet is manifest on three planes of being, *olam*, which stands for the temporal, *shanah*, the spatial, and *nefesh*, the microcosmic as reflected in human embodiment. Finally, the triune unity is related to the three groups into which the ancient Jews were divided, the Israelites, Levites, and Priests, which in Hebrew are *yehudi levi kohen*, the first letters in reverse order, *yod lamed kaf*, spelling *keli* and the last letters in order, *yod yod nun*, spelling *yayin*. According to Abulafia, this wordplay signifies that the Jewish people are the *keli yayin*, the 'vessel of wine', the mark of their chosen position vis-à-vis the other nations in virtue of which they are the 'universal particular' (*ha-meyuḥad ha-kelali*), that is, the particular ethnicity that can actualize the potentiality of human beings to become universal by receiving the intellectual overflow of the logos (*ha-shefa ha-sikhli ha-devari*).

BEIN YISRA'EL LA-AMMIM: ONTOLOGIZING OF ETHNO-SOCIAL BOUNDARIES

In spite of critical differences between Abulafia and kabbalists whose views are preserved in *Zohar*, on the issue of Israel's distinctive ontic status there is basic agreement. Dozens of textual examples can illustrate the point, but for my

²³⁰ On the importance of the threefold in Abulafia's writings, see Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, 131–3, n. 101.

²³¹ On the triad *ḥokhmah*, *binah*, and *da'at*, see Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, 119–20, nn. 66–7; 131–3, n. 101; 162; 190, n. 29.

purpose it is sufficient to mention at this juncture one zoharic text that relates to the issue of the contrast between the essential impurity of the nations and the purity of Israel:

R. Eleazar and R. Yeisa were sitting one night and they were engaged in [the study of] Torah. R. Eleazar said: Come and see: When the holy One, blessed be he, will resurrect the dead, all the souls that will be aroused before him will rise in images (*diyotnin*), in the very image that they had in this world. . . . R. Yeisa said: We have seen that as long as the person exists in this spirit [of holiness] he is not defiled, but when his soul departs, he is defiled. [R. Eleazar] said to him: It is certainly this way, for it has been said that when the evil inclination takes the spirit of the person, it defiles him and his body is impure. With respect to the other idolatrous nations, they are impure when they are alive, for their souls are from the side of impurity, and when that impurity is removed from them, their bodies remain without any defilement at all. Therefore, he who is conjoined to a woman from the other idolatrous nations is impure, and the child born to him will receive upon himself the spirit of impurity.²³²

The Aramaic expression that I have rendered as ‘person’ is *bar nash*. Lest one think that the zoharic author is speaking about human beings in a generic sense, let me note that from the context it is obvious that *bar nash* relates specifically to the Jews, who are set in contrast to the rest of the idolatrous nations, a coded reference to Christians.²³³ In a parallel to this zoharic passage, in *Sefer ha-Rimmon*, Moses de León, the thirteenth-century Spanish kabbalist who appears to have had the principal role in the composition and redaction of the main part of what has been transmitted as *Sefer ha-Zohar*, expresses himself in even bolder language, for he remarks without qualification:

You know that all of the Gentiles (*goyim*) and all of their matters are in the category of the impure.²³⁴ . . . You must know and discern that the Gentiles come from the side of impurity, for the souls of the Gentiles derive from the side of impurity. . . . [S]ince their cause is impure their bodies will perish and their souls will burn; their root and their source is impure.²³⁵

²³² *Zohar* 1: 131a–b. See *Zohar* 3: 62b.

²³³ See Matt, *Zohar*, 240; Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, 161 and 244, n. 92.

²³⁴ The radical position whereby all of the non-Jewish nations are indiscriminately characterized as impure in relation to the holiness of the Jews is affirmed by other kabbalists from the period of the *Zohar* as well. See e.g. Isaac ben Samuel of Acre, *Sefer Me'irat Einayim*, 7: ‘On account of our transgressions that have multiplied and our sins that have increased the diadem of our heads, which is *Malkhut*, has fallen . . . and since our essence has fallen, we have fallen amongst the nations in the midst of impurity.’

²³⁵ *Book of the Pomegranate*, 211–12. Consider the unqualified distinction between Jew and Gentile in the following comment in Joseph of Hamadan, ‘*Sefer Tashak*’, 94–5: ‘Thus [with respect to the nations of the world], in this world they are very elevated and they experience joy without pain, but, in the end, they do not have a laudable fruit as they are summoned to

Similarly, in *Mishkan ha-Edut*, in the context of discussing the transgression of a Jewish man having intercourse with a non-Jewish woman, who is referred to (on the basis of Mal. 2: 11) as the ‘daughter of an alien god’, de León contrasts in a categorical manner the holiness of Jews and the impurity of other nations. The former emanates from the pleroma of divine potencies and the latter from the realm of the serpent:

Know that the elements of the supernal gradations are divided into several aspects and functions, and in accordance with their secrets and their divisions all the families of the earth are divided below. Israel is amongst them as a unique and holy nation, which persists in its holiness and in the secret of the reality of the holy One, blessed be he, that disseminates in them in the secret of the holy forms that are given to them from the power of the river that comes forth without cessation.²³⁶ And just as the branches and the leaves separate as the foxes hold on to them,²³⁷ so the souls of the nations separate from the place of their separation from the secret of holiness, and the souls separate and fly out from the side of impurity, the side of the other god, in accordance with the impurity of the filth of the serpent, which is in the secret of the male and his female mate.²³⁸

Needless to say, the zoharic texts (and all subsequent kabbalistic works influenced by their terminology) will yield a radically different anthropological conception when it is understood that in the vast majority of cases terms such as *bar nash* and *benei nasha* denote not humanity in general, but the Jewish people in particular.²³⁹ To cite one other passage to illustrate the

Geheinom. But with respect to Israel we sit in the shadow of the apple, the shadow of the holy One, blessed be he, and we are in danger in this world, but, in the end, how beautiful is its scent and how worthy and sweet is its fruit in the world-to-come. Thus Israel said before the holy One, blessed be he, “Like an apple tree among the trees of the forest, so is my beloved among the youths” (Song 2: 3).’

²³⁶ In many passages in *Zohar* and the Hebrew theosophic works of de León, this is a standard way of referring to *Yesod*, the ninth of the ten *sefirot*, which corresponds to the phallic potency of God. See *Sheqel ha-Qodesh*, 56 and other references cited in n. 439.

²³⁷ Based on Song 2: 15.

²³⁸ Moses de León, *Mishkan ha-Edut*, MS Berlin, Staatsbibliothek Or. Quat. 833, fol. 26a. For a similar contrast between *bar nash* and the idolatrous nations, cf. *Zohar* 1: 131a, 205a; 2: 88b. In these contexts, the word *bar nash* refers to the Jew who is contrasted with the idolater, i.e. the Christian. The masculine character of *bar nash* is underscored from the intent of the passages, which is to prohibit sexual relations between the Jewish man and Christian woman.

²³⁹ The point is accentuated by the expression *bar nash yisra'el* found in several zoharic passages (e.g. *Zohar* 2: 65a; 3: 25b). The expressions *bar nash* and *benei nasha* are used in numerous passages in *Zohar*. According to a computer search of the standard three volumes of *Zohar*, which includes sections from *Midrash ha-Ne'elam*, *Ra'aya Meheimna*, and the various literary strata of what scholars call the main body of zoharic literature, *bar nash* occurs 1,624 times (27 occurrences in the abbreviated form *b' n*), *de-var nash* 614 times (13 occurrences in the abbreviated form *dv' n*), *be-var nash* 82 times (1 occurrence in the abbreviated form *bv' n*), *ke-var nash* 21 times, *le-var nash* 376 times (8 occurrences in the abbreviated form *lv' n*), *mi-bar*

philological point: summing up a discussion concerning the Sabbath meals of which the Jewish man is required to partake, the author of the zoharic text writes: 'A man (*bar nash*) must be joyous in his meal and he should complete these meals for they are meals of the perfect faith of the holy seed of Israel, for the supernal faith belongs to them and not to the idolatrous nations... through these meals it is known that Israel are the sons of the king for they are from the palace of the king and they are sons of faith.'²⁴⁰

Even in some passages where the expression *bar nash* is used with what appears to be a reference to humanity, closer examination reveals that the intent is the Jewish people. For example, the statement that 'man (*bar bash*) was created by means of the Torah'²⁴¹ clearly relates specifically to the Jewish people and not to human beings at large. Thus, in the continuation of the passage, it is affirmed that the Written Torah and the Oral Torah sustain man (*bar nash*) in the world. It makes little sense to interpret *bar nash* in this context as a reference to universal humanity, since the Torah in its dual aspect

nash 14 times, *benei nasha* 403 times, *bi-vene'i nasha* 48 times, *di-vene'i nasha* 150 times, *ki-vene'i nasha* 5 times, *li-vene'i nasha* 152 times, and *mi-benei nasha* 27 times. There are exceptions to the general philological claim I have made, and here I can only mention a few of the obvious ones. In *Zohar* 1: 13b, in the discussion of the ninth of the fourteen main commandments, the obligation for the wealthy to give to the poor is linked exegetically to the verse 'Let us make Adam in our image and in our likeness' (Gen. 1: 26): 'Adam' signifies male and female, 'our image' the wealthy, and 'our likeness' the poor. After making this exegetical point, the author remarks that he has seen in the 'Book of King Solomon' that 'whoever has pity with the intention of the heart upon the poor, his image never changes from the image of primal Adam, and as long as the image of Adam is inscribed on him, he rules over all the creatures of the world'. Further support that in this case the human image applies to all humanity is that in the continuation of the passage the veracity of the dictum is illustrated by the case of Nebuchadnezzar. It must be pointed out, however, that in the very next commandment, which involves the donning of phylacteries, the same biblical verse is used as a proof-text in support of this ritual. Inasmuch as the obligation to put on phylacteries is exclusive to the Jewish people, it follows that 'supernal image' (*diyoqna ila'ah*) is restricted as well to an idealized Israel. See also *Zohar* 1: 20a. It is not clear if in that context the term *bar nash* refers to humanity in general or to the Jewish people in particular. In support of the latter possibility, there are a plethora of passages in zoharic literature wherein it is clear that the divine image is associated exclusively with Israel. The term *benei nasha* clearly denotes humanity in general in *Zohar* 1: 37a, 40a, 49b, 56b, 82a; 2: 68b; 3: 56b, 152a. Another notable exception is found in *Zohar* 1: 56a: 'R. Eleazar said that in the days of Enosh there were people (*benei nasha*) who were wise in magic, sorcery, and the wisdom to obstruct heavenly forces. There was no person (*bar nasha*) that was occupied with it from the day that Adam departed from the Garden of Eden, and he took out with him the wisdom of the leaves of the tree... until Enosh came.' On the idolatrous practices of Enosh, see *Zohar* 2: 192b. A distinction between *bar nash* and Jew seems also to be implied in *Zohar* 1: 63b wherein a particular *bar nash* is identified as a *yehudi*. Let me emphasize again that this list of counter-examples is by no means exhaustive, but the dominant use of these terms in zoharic literature is clearly the more restricted sense of the Jewish people.

²⁴⁰ *Zohar* 2: 88b.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.* 3: 35b.

is the exclusive possession of Israel.²⁴² Another pointed illustration of the ethnocentric anthropology is found in a passage in de León's *Mishkan ha-Edut* wherein the aggadic, philosophic, and kabbalistic threads are woven together.²⁴³ The author begins with the ostensibly universalistic claim (based on standard medieval philosophical discourse) that man (*adam*) is created with matter and form, and the latter desires the supernal form, but then he quickly affirms the more particularistic position (textually based on the aggadic precedent²⁴⁴) that the world was created for the sake of Israel. Insofar as de León identifies the cosmos as the 'world of action' (*olam ha-ma'aseh*), which is further designated the 'end of thought' (*sof ha-maḥshavah*), and only Jews can sustain that world by pious actions, it follows that the contemplative

²⁴² Particularly relevant is the midrashic tradition that the Oral Torah, or the Mishnah, which is the foundational document of Oral Torah, is the 'mystery' that cannot be disclosed to non-Jews. See *Midrash Tanḥuma*, Wayyera, 5; *Midrash Tanḥuma*, ed. Buber, Wayyera, 6, 44b; *Pesiqta Rabbati*, 5: 3, p. 52; Bockmuehl, *Revelation and Mystery*, 118. On the distinctiveness of Israel vis-à-vis the nations related specifically to the Oral Torah, see also Palestinian Talmud, Pe'ah 2: 6, 17a; Ḥagigah 1: 8, 76d; *Midrash Tanḥuma*, ed. Buber, Ki Tissa, 17, 58b–59a; *Exodus Rabbah* 47: 1. Simon, *Verus Israel*, 189, suggests that the rabbinic insistence that the Oral Torah is the exclusive possession of Israel should be seen in the context of the Christian claim to be the chosen people and the true Israel. For a similar argument, although nuanced in a slightly different manner, see Lieberman, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine*, 207–8. For discussion of critical passages in rabbinic literature that express the universalistic perspective regarding the applicability of the revealed word of God to all nations, see Goldenberg, *Nations*, 97–108. For discussion of this issue in later sources, see Sklare, 'Are the Gentiles Obligated to Observe the Torah?' 311–46. Also relevant here is the rabbinic notion of the seven Noahide laws, which encompass the commandments that apply to all human beings. See Loewe, 'Potentialities and Limitations', 124–7, and Novak, *Natural Law*, 149–73.

²⁴³ *Mishkan ha-Edut*, fols. 6a–b. See as well the extended discussion on the purpose of Adam's existence in fols. 7b–10a. It is evident from that analysis that the ontological situation of Adam is refracted through the prism of the kabbalistic symbolism so that he is depicted as a righteous Jew, indeed the paradigm of the kabbalist. See above, n. 160. Consider as well de León's description of the revelatory experience that occurs to man (*adam*) upon the death of his body in *ibid.*, fol. 16a. It is not possible to translate this depiction in universalistic terms, for the post-mortem vision of the divine presence is predicated on the separation of the holy and pure soul from the body, and this soul is ontologically unique to the Jewish people. See, however, *ibid.*, fols. 12a–b: through his transgressive act of disobedience, Adam partook of the 'wine of lust' (*yayin shel ta'awah*), which is the demonic potency from which all the Gentiles (*goyim*) are sustained.

²⁴⁴ For references to this motif, see Ginzberg, *Legends*, 5: 67, n. 8. Ginzberg's remark that the rabbinic conception of the world having been created for the sake of Israel 'does not owe its origin to national pride, but is closely connected with the ethical conception of creation' is apologetic in nature. For Ginzberg, the ethical conception entails positing the human being as the purpose of creation, and in support of this he refers to passages in Philo and the rabbinic corpus. But this interpretation is predicated on decoding the reference to 'Israel' as a trope for humanity in general, an approach that I do not think is warranted, at least not for the rabbinic texts. Certainly, in the kabbalistic material the ethnocentric element is paramount, and the sense in which Israel truly is the perfect anthropos underscores a very deep national (if not racial) pride.

life, which entails conjunction with the ‘world of thought’ (*olam ha-mahshavah*), is not available to anyone but the Jew.

The word *adam* in the most exact sense denotes the divine image, and the latter is the supernal Israel. It follows that texts that depict the formation of *adam* below should be understood more specifically as referring to the embodied configuration of the Jewish soul,²⁴⁵ a point that is often missed by scholars who apply the anthropocentric orientation of the *Zohar* (or related kabbalistic literature) to human beings in general.²⁴⁶ From the perspective of the kabbalists, the symbol of primal Adam does not denote ‘man’ in an unqualified sense,²⁴⁷ but it refers rather to Israel, which is the ideal human, the arch-anthropos, that bears the image of God. Consider, for example, the following passage:

R. Simeon said: It is written, ‘This is the book of the generations of man’ (*zeh sefer toldot adam*) (Gen. 5: 1). Did he have a book? Rather it has been established²⁴⁸ that the holy One, blessed be he, showed to primal Adam each generation and its interpreters. How did he show it to him? If you say that he saw by means of the holy spirit that in the future they would come to the world like one who sees through wisdom what will come about in the world, it is not so; rather he saw everything with the eye, and that image that in the future will exist in the world he saw with the eye. What is the explanation? From the day the world was created all the souls that in the future would exist in people (*benei nasha*) stood before the holy One, blessed be he, in that very image with which they would be in the world. In this manner, after all of the righteous ones depart from this world, all of the souls ascend, and the holy One,

²⁴⁵ See e.g. *Zohar* 2: 166a–b; 2: 178a (*Sifra di-Şeni’uta*); 3: 48a, 147a (*Idra Rabba*); *Zohar Hadash*, 78c.

²⁴⁶ See e.g. Scholem, *Major Trends*, 239–43; Tishby, *Wisdom*, 677–722; Altmann, ‘Delphic Maxim’, 208–13; id., ‘*Homo Imago Dei*’, 257–8; Ginsburg, ‘Zelem ’Elohim’; id., *Sabbath*, 289–96.

²⁴⁷ As one finds, for example, in the writings of Jung. See e.g. *Mysterium Coniunctionis*, 50, regarding ‘Adam Kadmon’ as the ‘Original Man of Jewish Gnosis.’ For a similar misunderstanding, see *ibid.* 23, and id., *Aion*, 218, n. 136. Jung’s understanding of kabbalistic anthropology no doubt reflects a similar strategy of reading evident in Christian kabbalah where, for obvious theological reasons, the more particularistic and ethnocentric conception of *adam* in traditional kabbalah is reinterpreted in universalistic terms. Idel, ‘Reflections on Kabbalah’, 9–11, points out that the ‘phenomenological affinity’ between the supernal anthropos in kabbalistic lore and the cosmic conception of Christ played a major role in the development of Christian kabbalah. He remarks as well that, insofar as Christian kabbalists had no need to emphasize the theurgical impact of ritual upon the Godhead, a basic tenet of Jewish esotericism, the transposition of kabbalah into a Christian key resulted in the ‘dissolution of the link of theosophy and theurgy’. See also id., ‘Jewish Kabbalah in Christian Garb’. In my judgement, another facet of the adoption of the kabbalah on the part of Christian thinkers was the presentation of the anthropomorphic symbolism in more universalistic terms. See Maiorino, *Adam*, 39–61. It seems that, in this regard, modern scholars who speak of the kabbalistic notions of humanity in less ethnocentric terms have been influenced unwittingly by Christian kabbalah.

²⁴⁸ Babylonian Talmud, *Avodah Zarah* 5a; *Sanhedrin* 38b.

blessed be he, prepares for them a new image in the pattern of that world in which they will be garbed. Thus they all exist before him, and primal Adam saw them with the eye. You might say that after he has seen them they no longer exist in their reality. Come and see: All the words of the holy One, blessed be he, actually exist, and they stand before him until they descend into the world. In this manner, it is written ‘but both with those who are standing here with us [this day before the Lord our God and with those who are not with us here this day]’ (Deut. 29: 14). It has been established²⁴⁹ that all of the people (*benei nasha*) that would in the future be in the world were found there.²⁵⁰

Prima facie, one might argue that the author of this passage, basing himself on an earlier rabbinic source, affirms that the souls of all humankind—here depicted as the image (*diyogna*, from the Greek *ikon*) of this corporeal world in which the individual is garbed²⁵¹ in the manner that the righteous are garbed in the image of the divine realm when they depart from this world²⁵²—existed before God from the time of the creation of the world and they were shown to Adam. It would seem, accordingly, that at least in this context the term *benei nasha* does indeed signify humanity at large, which would justify my translation ‘people’. At the end of the citation, however, it becomes evident that this is not the author’s intent, for his reference to the appearance at the Sinaitic theophany of the images of all the people that would exist in the future can only denote the Jewish nation. The rabbinic texts upon which these words are based unequivocally assert that the souls of all

²⁴⁹ *Exodus Rabbah* 28: 6; *Midrash Tanhuma*, Nešavim, 3; *Pirḳei Rabbi Eli’ezer*, ch. 41.

²⁵⁰ *Zohar* 1: 90a–b.

²⁵¹ Elsewhere in zoharic literature and related kabbalistic works we find the description of the body as the garment of the soul, which is identified as the essence of the person. See e.g. *Zohar* 1: 20b; 2: 76a; *Zohar Ḥadash*, 78c; *Tiqqunei Zohar*, § 60, 93b; ‘*Sefer ha-Mishkal*, 44; *Sheqel ha-Qodesh*, 28–9. Several of these sources have been previously cited by Liebes, *Sections of the Zohar Lexicon*, 172. In the aforementioned passage from *Sheqel ha-Qodesh*, as Mopsik remarked on p. 28, n. 241, de León follows the Maimonidean approach by identifying the divine image in a human being as the intellect or the ‘rational form’ (*ha-ṣurah ha-sikhilit*). It is evident, however, that the philosophical idea is reworked in this kabbalistic context, for the image of the body is applied to *Shekhinah*, the garment for the three central emanations, *Hesed*, *Gevurah*, and *Rahamim*, which together constitute the real *adam* or the soul. The image of the garment is also explained in terms of the ineffable name (YHWH) garbing itself in the appellation (Adonai). See *Mishkan ha-Edut*, fols. 35a–b; *Zohar* 2: 230b. The influence of de León’s comparison of the body as garment of the soul to the *Shekhinah* as the garment of the central three *sefirot* is discernible in Bahya ben Asher, *Rabbenu Bahya: Be’ur al ha-Torah*, 1: 172–3 (ad Gen. 18: 18). The matter of the influence of Moses de León on Bahya ben Asher deserves a separate study, but I do think that the negative assessment on the part of Gottlieb, *Kabbalah in the Writings of R. Bahya ben Asher*, 147, n. 7, should be qualified.

²⁵² The principle, which is mentioned in many passages, is stated succinctly in *Zohar* 2: 229b: ‘Come and see: the soul does not ascend to appear before the holy King until it merits to be garbed in the supernal garment to appear there. In a similar manner, it does not descend below until it is garbed in the garment of this world.’ See *Zohar* 2: 231a; Cohen-Alloro, *Secret of the Garment*, 50–67.

future Jewish generations were standing at Sinai, but there is no mention of the souls of humanity in a generic sense.²⁵³ There is no reason (either exegetical or logical) why the kabbalistic reworking of the aggadic theme would necessitate a universalizing of this claim. On the contrary, in light of the anthropological attitude affirmed in many passages in *Zohar*, it makes more sense to conclude the reverse: the seemingly universalistic expression *benei nasha* denotes the Jews who represent an idealized humanity.²⁵⁴

ANDROCENTRIC INTERPRETATION OF THE DIVINE IMAGE

The limited, ethnocentric anthropology of the zoharic theosophy is expressed by de León in the following passage from *Sefer ha-Rimmon*:

One should not kill a Jewish man (*adam mi-yisra'el*), as it says, 'Do not murder' (Exod. 20: 13). The rabbis, blessed their memory, already explained this subject and

²⁵³ To be sure, there are rabbinic texts that emphasize the universal dimension of revelation. Thus, for example, in a number of sources the localization of the theophanous event in the no-man's-land of the desert is explained in terms of God's desire to allocate to every nation a share in the Torah, for had the latter been given in the land of Israel the Jewish people would have an excuse to claim it as their exclusive possession. See *Mekhilta*, Bahodesh, ch. 1, p. 205, and parallel sources noted in n. 16 *ad loc.* This tradition, however, does not indicate that all of the nations, let alone all the future souls of these nations, were present at the Sinaitic epiphany. According to the tradition preserved in the name of R. Yoḥanan in *Exodus Rabbah* 2: 9, the voice of revelation went forth and divided into seventy voices corresponding to seventy languages so that all the nations of the world would hear the word of God. The universalistic impulse is mitigated, however, by the fact that the intent of this midrashic passage is to underscore that only Israel were strong enough to survive the experience, all other nations perishing upon hearing the divine voice. An echo of this older aggadic theme is discernible in the comment in Joseph of Hamadan, '*Sefer Tashak*', 99–100: 'The Israelites said to the holy One, blessed be he, when he was revealed at Mt Sinai to give them the Torah and commandments, "He brought me to the house of wine" (Song 2: 4) corresponding to the seventy nations, which is the numerology of the word "wine" (*yayin*):' See also *Sifre on Deuteronomy*, § 343, pp. 395–7 (and the many parallel sources cited in n. 14 *ad loc.*), which preserves the tradition that when God wanted to give the Torah, he approached all the nations, but only Israel was capable of assuming the responsibility of receiving it. Needless to say, the notion that Torah is the exclusive inheritance of the Jewish people, linked exegetically to Deut. 29: 9 or 33: 4, is expressed elsewhere in rabbinic literature. See Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 59a. See also *Exodus Rabbah* 30: 9, where the distinctiveness of Israel's receiving the Torah among the nations is compared parabolically to the sons of a king who uniquely assume the role of watching the king's orchard, a task assigned to the king himself prior to the birth of his sons. Finally, mention should be made of the rabbinic tradition that of the ten commandments the first five apply exclusively to Israel whereas the second five apply equally to Israel and to the nations of the world. See *Pesiqta Rabbati*, 21: 2, p. 436.

²⁵⁴ Support for my interpretation is found in *Zohar* 1: 19a. The same idea regarding the image of the person is expressed in that context, but there it is unambiguously clear that *bar nash* signifies the Jew exclusively.

the matter is clear. Thus they said that the one who kills [a man] diminishes the image [of God].²⁵⁵ The matter is indeed correct, for man (*adam*) is created in the image and in the likeness, as it says, '[Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed;] for in his image did God make man' (Gen. 9: 6). Inasmuch as a person is in the secret of the supernal archetype (*dugma elyonah*), one who rises against his comrade and murders him, he diminishes the image of the world (*diyoqno shel ha-olam*) created by wisdom and in a level that surpasses other created beings.²⁵⁶

The rabbinic notion (based on the biblical verse) that murder of a human being amounts to diminishing the divine image is applied exclusively in de León's kabbalistic interpretation to Jews, for they alone are created in the image of the supernal form of the sefirotic potencies. The matter must be further qualified, however, for *bar nash* or its semantic equivalent *adam* in the most precise sense denotes, in most zoharic sources, not only Jews but the circumcised Jewish male.²⁵⁷ Let me cite as an illustration of this point the following warning to Jewish men not to engage in sexual intercourse with Gentile women, an exhortation that has to be seen against the well-documented fact that many of the Jewish elite in thirteenth-century Spain engaged in pre-marital and extra-marital sex with both Jewish and non-Jewish women:²⁵⁸

It has been established that the verse 'Let us make Adam in our image and in our likeness' (Gen. 1: 26) refers to the moment of intercourse (*ziwwuga*), and thus [the words] 'image' (*selem*) and 'likeness' (*demut*) refer to the union of the two [male and female]... I have found in the 'Book of King Solomon' that in the moment of intercourse, the holy One, blessed be he, sends an image of a human countenance (*diyoqna ke-paršufa de-var nash*), an impression engraved in the image (*reshima haqīqa be-šolma*), and it stands over that union. Had permission been given to the eye to see, man (*bar nash*) would see over his head this image inscribed with the human countenance, for through this image a person is created... With respect to Israel, who are holy, this image (*selem*) is holy and from a holy place it exists within them. The image of those who worship the stars and constellations is from evil matters and from the side of impurity it exists within them. Thus a person should not mix his image with the image of an idolater because the one is holy and the other is impure.²⁵⁹

²⁵⁵ *Mekhilta*, Yitro, ch. 8, p. 233; Tosefta, Yevamot 8: 4; Babylonian Talmud, Yevamot 63b; *Genesis Rabbah* 34: 14, p. 326.

²⁵⁶ Moses de León, *Book of the Pomegranate*, 337.

²⁵⁷ *Zohar* 1: 94a, 162a, 228a.

²⁵⁸ See Baer, *History*, 1: 256–60; Assis, 'Sexual Behavior', 27. The preoccupation of rabbinic authorities and kabbalists with sexual intercourse between Jews and non-Jews should be seen not only in terms of an internal trajectory but also in terms of a general anxiety with regard to miscegenation exemplified in medieval society. See Nirenberg, 'Religious and Sexual Boundaries'; id., *Communities*, 128–43; id., 'Love Between Muslim and Jew', 127–55.

²⁵⁹ *Zohar* 3: 104b; cf. parallel in 1: 219b–220a.

In this passage the expression *bar nash* specifically denotes the Jewish male who should avoid having intercourse with a non-Jewish woman, for by so doing he would mix the holy and impure images.²⁶⁰ To cite a second example that drives the point home even more emphatically, ‘R. Hamnuna said: “Do not let your mouth cause your flesh to sin” (Eccles. 5: 5), for a person (*bar nash*) should not let his mouth lead him to an evil thought, which will cause him to sin with respect to the holy flesh upon which is inscribed the holy covenant.’²⁶¹ Conversing about sexual matters can lead one to an improper thought, which in turn can cause one to sin in the flesh. Inasmuch as the covenant of circumcision is restricted to Jewish males, the expression *bar nash* in this passage can only refer to a Jewish man. In a similar vein, we read in another passage:

‘For the Lord God is sun and shield’ (Ps. 84: 12), ‘sun and shield’ refers to the holy covenant: Just as the sun shines and illumines the world, so the holy covenant shines and illumines the body of the person (*gufa de-var nash*), and just as the shield is to protect the person (*bar nash*), so too the holy covenant is a shield for the person. . . . He who lies with respect to the holy covenant that is sealed on his flesh it is as if he lied with respect to the name of the holy One, blessed be he; the one who lies with respect to the seal of the king lies with respect to the king.²⁶²

These statements (and dozens more that could have been cited) make no sense unless we render *bar nash* as a reference to the Jewish man. The textual evidence is overwhelming on this point: the status of human being in its most precise sense pertains to the circumcised male Jew.²⁶³ In *Sefer ha-Rimmon*, de León frames this issue in terms of the perfection (*temimut*) required of the individual who worships God, especially through the positive commandments, which correspond to the masculine potency of the divine:

Man (*adam*) must be perfect (*tamim*) in the worship of the creator, blessed be he, with the wholeness of his heart (*temimut levavo*) without thinking about any mundane matter. Thus one who performs the commandments and holds on to his God and fears him must be perfect to fulfill his commandments. In this there is an allusion to

²⁶⁰ On the doctrine of the image (*selem*) in zoharic kabbalah, see Tishby, *Wisdom*, 770–3; Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape*, 261–71.

²⁶¹ *Zohar* 1: 8a.

²⁶² *Ibid.* 2: 3b.

²⁶³ The kabbalistic symbolism reinforces the androcentrism of the rabbinic conception of circumcision. Regarding the rabbinic view, see Hoffman, *Covenant*, who correctly notes that circumcision as a ‘cultural symbol’ underscores the ‘gender opposition in rabbinic Judaism’ (p. 24). In particular, Hoffman focuses on the ‘binary opposition of men’s blood drawn during circumcision and women’s blood that flows during menstruation’ (p. 23); and see extended discussion on pp. 136–54. See also Cohen, *Why Aren’t Jewish Women Circumcised?*, pp. xii–xiii, 102–3, 135–41; Marienberg, *Niddah*, 23–41. For an alternative discussion of the ‘rabbinic science of women’s blood’, see Fonrobert, *Menstrual Purity*, 103–27.

the perfection of the covenant (*shelemut ha-berit*) that Abraham, our patriarch, received on his flesh, for on account of this he was called 'perfect' (*tamim*)²⁶⁴ to illustrate that a man is not perfect in his body (*shalem be-gufo*) except through the perfection of the seal of God (*shelemut hotamo shel maqom*) inscribed on his flesh. Here is an allusion to the positive commandment, which is in the secret of the masculine (*sod zakhor*).²⁶⁵

Recapitulating this theme in slightly different terms in another composition, de León writes: 'When one receives the holy covenant that is sealed and inscribed on his flesh, then he is included in the category of a human being (*nikhlal bikhelal adam*).'²⁶⁶

The link between circumcision and the classification *adam* underlies the zoharic assertion, *u-ma'n ihu de-qa'im be-raza de-adam ma'n de-na'ir ot qayyama qaddisha*, which translates literally as 'and who is the one who exists in the secret of Adam? The one who guards the sign of the holy covenant.'²⁶⁷ Only the Jewish man who avoids illicit sexual acts, and thereby protects the covenant incised on his flesh, fully maintains the status of human being. To be human in the most perfect sense, one must bear and guard the mark of the covenantal cut, the seal of the supernal king, in virtue of which one is inscribed with and bound to the name.²⁶⁸ It follows, therefore, that humanity is fully embodied in the Jewish male who has separated the demonic foreskin from the holy covenant and consequently is endowed with the theurgic capacity to unite the masculine and feminine potencies in the divine by means of guarding the covenant from sexual sin. Righteousness is linked especially to sexual purity and the protection of the phallic covenant. The zoharic orientation is well captured in the following comment of Simeon Lavi:

The Community of Israel (*keneset yisra'el*) above is constantly thirsty to drink the waters of the 'river that goes forth from Eden' (Gen. 2: 10) to irrigate her . . . and when she is established on her foundation all the worlds are blessed. Israel are the ones that cause this through guarding the phallus (*shemirat ha-berit*) by not giving their seed to the Gentile, for this is the essence of its being guarded. When they do not guard the phallus below, they cause the supernal righteous one (*ṣaddiq ha-elyon*) not to overflow in his palace, and 'the righteous man perished' (Isa. 57: 1) and 'the river dried up and was parched' (Isa. 19: 5).²⁶⁹

²⁶⁴ *Genesis Rabbah* 46: 4–5, pp. 461–3; Babylonian Talmud, Nedarim 32a.

²⁶⁵ *Book of the Pomegranate*, 376.

²⁶⁶ *Sefer ha-Mishkal*, 131.

²⁶⁷ *Zohar* 2: 214b.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.* 1: 58a, wherein the righteous are described as 'being inscribed in the marking of the seal of the supernal king so that they might be inscribed in his name, and he places their names in the earth, as is appropriate'.

²⁶⁹ Simeon Lavi, *Ketem Paz*, 2: 365. See Huss, *Sockets*, 208.

In one of his compositions, de León relates this matter to the exegetical problem of how Jacob, who symbolically incarnates the divine attribute of truth, could have acted deceitfully in the acquisition of the firstborn's blessing from Esau (Gen. 25: 30–3).²⁷⁰

Since Jacob knew the conniving [of Esau], he acted with him in this very manner. However, everything that he did in his heart was only for the sake of the worship of his creator and to purify his sanctuary, as is appropriate, and the sacred and his holiness and the fulfillment of the faithful worship will spread in all of the worlds, for all that a fearing person can draw down the spirit of impurity below to subdue it so that it will not rule in the world, and whoever can in any way remove impurity from the world, this is praiseworthy, and such a one is called a servant of the Lord. Thus, Jacob was called 'my servant' (Isa. 44: 1), for he broke the shells, as he was their core in a way that was not the case with the other patriarchs. Therefore, this is the right path for every enlightened man (*adam maskkil*), to push away the pollution and to remove it so that it will not rule in the world and all the more so in holy matters. Hence, a Jew is not called a Jew (*yehudi*) until the foreskin (*orlah*) is removed from him and he enters into the covenant (*berit*). When the foreskin is removed, then he is called a Jew. Thus one should not wonder that the perfect pious one (*he-ḥasid shalem*), pure in all things, gave of his soul in all of its capacity so that impurity would not rule in the world at all, to push it away. This is sufficient for every enlightened one upon whom the spirit dwells.²⁷¹

From the passage, which resonates with many zoharic texts, we can elicit that the enlightened kabbalist emulates the way of Jacob who broke the shell of demonic impurity by acting deceptively with Esau. Of all the patriarchs Jacob was the one to break the shell for he embodied the inner core of truth. This, according to the above homily, is the meaning of Jacob's title 'my servant' (Isa. 44: 1), *he broke the shells, as he was their core in a way that was not the case with the other patriarchs*. The kabbalist upon whom the divine spirit dwells must do the same through proper intentionality—'the perfect pious one' that gives 'of his soul in all of its capacity so that impurity would not rule in the world at all'. In emulation of Jacob, the *ḥasid* has the charge and potency to crack the demonic shell.

The act of separation of shell and core, deception and truth, is epitomized in the rite of circumcision through which the foreskin is excised and removed from the phallus upon which the sign of the covenant is inscribed. In the language of another zoharic passage: 'Come and see: Esau was the shell (*qelippah*) and the other side (*siṭra aḥra*). When the shell came forth and was removed, the core was there (*moḥa nimṣa*). The foreskin at first exists

²⁷⁰ Needless to say, the scriptural narrative of Esau's selling the birthright to Jacob was an important exegetical locus for Jewish–Christian polemic. See e.g. *Nizzahon Vetus*, 56, 246–7.

²⁷¹ Moses de León, *She'elot u-Teshuvot*, 46. For a parallel to this source, see *Zohar* 1: 139b.

outside the phallus (*berit*), which is most precious of all, and it is revealed afterward.²⁷²

To be sure, the zoharic authorship on many occasions (following classical rabbinic sources, which, in turn, are based on scriptural precedent) emphasizes that the complete human entails male and female.²⁷³ One of the ways to conceive of the theurgical purpose of ritual observance is to delineate it as an effort to raise the feminine from a state of degradation, to reunite her with her masculine consort in matrimony, a process that mimics and thereby anticipates redemption from exile. The conjugal repairing is obviously advantageous to the male as well, for his own sense of perfection is dependent on being unified with the female: neither is whole without the other. From this perspective one can and should speak of gender as a correlative phenomenon. However, as I have noted elsewhere, the construction of gender proffered in *Zohar* and other kabbalistic writings ensues from a mythopoetic conception of a male androgyne, that is, the female is perceived as a part of and derived from the male.²⁷⁴ Accordingly, the condition of separation, which is characteristic of the spiritual nature of exile, necessitates the heterosexual bonding of male and female, but the union itself, which marks a later phase of redemption, entails the restoration of female to male and the consequent overcoming of gender dimorphism.²⁷⁵ In this state of reconstituted masculinity, the norm of heterosexual behaviour gives way to an ascetic homoeroticism, a bonding of males predicated on the abrogation of sexual appetite.²⁷⁶

The complex anthropology embraced by the zoharic authorship, which served as the basis for the soteriological orientation promoted in Lurianic kabbalah, seventeenth-century Sabbatian messianism, and eighteenth-century Hasidic pietism, can be understood simply as a sustained mystical reflection on the account of the creation of the female from the side (or rib) of the male (Gen. 2: 21–2). It must be pointed out, moreover, that the notion

²⁷² *Zohar* 3: 185a–b.

²⁷³ The point has been discussed by many scholars, too numerous to mention here by name. For a succinct review of the relevant zoharic texts, see Tishby, *Wisdom*, 1355–79. See also Mopsik, 'Genèse 1: 26–27'.

²⁷⁴ A similar claim can be made for the rabbinic attitude towards heterosexuality, which is accorded positive value when it is connected to the procreative function, but which is also seen as the primary means by which one acquires a sense of psychic identity and wholeness. See Biale, *Eros*, 50–9. Novak, *Image of the Non-Jew*, 211, concludes that on the basis of this orientation the rabbis would have considered incest and homosexuality to be 'regressions'. For different perspectives on the rabbinic notion of sexuality and procreation, see Boyarin, *Carnal Israel*, 46–57, 61–76.

²⁷⁵ Wolfson, 'Woman'; id., *Circle*, 79–121; id., 'Tiqqun ha-Shekhinah'; id., 'Eunuchs', and the revised version of this study in id., *Language, Eros, Being*, 296–332.

²⁷⁶ Wolfson, 'Eunuchs'; id., 'Asceticism and Eroticism', and the expanded version in *Language, Eros, Being*, 333–71.

of the androgyne, which is linked with the Genesis 1 account of simultaneous creation of the sexes ('male and female he created them'), is nonetheless interpreted by kabbalists in light of the construction of the female from the male in Genesis 2, for the androgynous nature of primal Adam entailed the ontological containment of female in male.²⁷⁷ I will cite one example, a section from Joseph Gikatilla's treatise on the secret of the marriage of David and Bathsheba, to illustrate the point:

When male was created by necessity his mate was created with him, for above they do not make half a form but a complete form. Above a soul is not created that is not male and female, as it says, 'Let us make man in our image and in our likeness' (Gen. 1: 26), and it is written, 'male and female he created them' (Gen. 1: 27), on the very day that he created them. . . . Therefore, at the time of the creation of man he was created androgynous in soul, that is, two-faced, the form of male and female. Together with the soul of the male was created the soul of his mate, in the secret of 'He blew into his nostrils the breath of life' (Gen. 2: 7), in the secret of 'male and female he created them' (Gen. 1: 27), and in the secret of 'and he took one of his ribs' (Gen. 2: 21), in the secret of 'Then the man said, This one at last is bone of my bones [and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called woman for from man was she taken]. Hence a man leaves his father and mother [and clings to his wife so that they become one flesh]' (Gen. 2: 23–4). On account of this reason the light of the moon is only from the sun, and hence the daughter does not inherit property for the soul of the daughter is not created above except at the time of creation of her husband who is her mate, and this is [the import of] 'and clings to his wife [so that they become one flesh]'.²⁷⁸

The originary condition of androgyny does not entail a disembodied state wherein sexual difference is erased. Closely following the scriptural narrative, kabbalists maintain that intercourse offers the male the opportunity to restore to himself the part taken away with the creation of his female soulmate.²⁷⁹ For the purpose of this chapter, my main point is that this conception of gender implies that the ideal anthropos is instantiated/embodied in the male Jew who contains within himself his feminine counterpart just as primal man (*ish*) contained woman (*ishshah*) as a part of his original constitution. That the kabbalistic conception of the anthropos refers exclusively to the male is implicit in the recurrent citation of the idea that the community of Israel that left Egypt numbered 600,000 adult males.²⁸⁰ According to the theosophic appropriation of this motif, the Israelite nation in the mundane sphere corresponds to the sixth of the ten emanations, the central *sefirah* of *Tif'eret*,

²⁷⁷ See *Zohar* 2: 55a; Wolfson, *Circle*, 80–5; id., 'Constructions', 57–80.

²⁷⁸ Gikatilla, *Le Secret du mariage*, 45–9. See id., *Sha'arei Şedeq*, 32a–b.

²⁷⁹ *Circle*, 92–8.

²⁸⁰ *Song of Songs Rabbah* 3: 17, 6: 23; *Numbers Rabbah* 11: 3. In some sources, it is specified that the minimum age to be included in this consensus was 20 years old.

the balance of compassion discerned from the space wherein severity and grace face one another in the juxtaposition of the sameness of their difference, intermingling in the difference of their sameness. Jewish males, therefore, represent the totality of the community of Israel, which encompasses men and women, just as the attribute of *Tiferet* comprises left and right.²⁸¹

The point is well captured in the remark of Moses Graff in his *Zera Qodesh* to the effect that the ‘600,000 souls of Israel, the holy seed, emerge from the union, copulation, and mating of the supernal brain’.²⁸² The purpose of this treatise, as the title (‘Holy Seed’) plainly indicates, is to provide a detailed account of the rectification (*tiqqun*) for the spilling of semen in vain, an act that kabbalists long regarded (in large part due to several key zoharic passages²⁸³) as the severest of all transgressions demanding the harshest of punishments. In Lurianic, Sabbatian, and Hasidic texts, the ideal of redemption, of both a personal and a collective nature, is interpreted through this narrow lens as the reparation of the sin of involuntary and voluntary seminal emissions.²⁸⁴ Reflecting much older sources, Graff relates the severity of this sinful act to the ontological supremacy of Israel as the holy seed, which originates in one of the highest regions of the Godhead, for just as in the male anatomy the semen was thought to proceed from the brain, so above in the divine anthropos.²⁸⁵ The most significant point for the purposes of this discussion is that the conception of the holy seed that comes forth from the skull, identified further with the letter *yod* or the attribute of *Ḥokhmah*, relates

²⁸¹ *Zohar* 1: 2b, 22a; 2: 2b, 195a; *Zohar Ḥadash* 121c (in that context, the number 600,000 is related to the Jewish soul (*nishmata*) which is the human being (*bar nashi*) that God implants in every generation). The kabbalistic symbolism is based on the midrashic notion that the word *yisra'el* is an acrostic of the expression *yesh shishim ribbo otiiyyot la-torah*, ‘there are 600,000 letters in the Torah’, which correspond to the number of Jewish souls present at Sinai. According to one elaboration of this older motif, each soul is related to another letter, which also represents a distinct way of interpreting the text. See *Sefer ha-Kawwanot*, 53b; Semah, *Naggid u-Meṣaweh*, 80; Scholem, *On the Kabbalah*, 64–5.

²⁸² Graff, *Zera Qodesh*, 6a.

²⁸³ *Zohar* 1: 62a, 219b.

²⁸⁴ See Meroz, ‘Redemption’, 329–35, 343–4; Liebes, ‘“Two Young Roes”’, 141; Schatz-Uffenheimer, *Hasidism*, 345, n. 10; Wolfson, ‘Engenderment’, 239; Gamlieli, ‘Stages of “Becoming”’, 283. On the role of Adam’s sin in Lurianic kabbalah and the depiction of messiah as reparation of that sin, see also Scholem, *Sabbatai Ṣevi*, 37–9, 47–9, 405; Tishby, *Doctrine of Evil*, 91–105.

²⁸⁵ *Zera Qodesh*, 8a, where Graff uses this symbolic connection to explain the difficult passage in *Zohar* 1: 219b to the effect that spilling semen in vain is the one transgression for which there is no repentance (*teshuvah*). According to Graff, since the semen originates in the brain, which he associates with wisdom (*Ḥokhmah*), it is not enough to repent, for in so doing one reaches only the level of repentance, which is the attribute of understanding (*Binah*). One must, therefore, extend beyond *teshuvah* if one wants to rectify one’s misdoing. This is a rather clever exegesis that imparts hope to a passage that seemingly leaves no possibility for atonement.

primarily to the souls of Jewish men who produce the holy seed of Israel soiled by the aberrant act of onanism.

To reiterate the key point, the anthropological perspective articulated in *Zohar* is that the soul of Israel derives from the right side of holiness and is manifest most fully in the circumcised male body, whereas the soul of the idolatrous nations derives from the left side of impurity and is emblemized by the uncircumcised penis. The ontological participation of Israel in the Godhead is treated as one of the deep mysteries revealed to kabbalists: “The secret of secrets is given to the wise of the heart: Within the supernal holy camps there are supernal gradations, some atop others, some on the inside and others on the outside. The inner ones are bound to the holy King, and they are bound to Israel, the holy sons of the holy One, blessed be he.”²⁸⁶ In many zoharic texts, the ontological grounding of the Jewish soul in the realm of holiness is contrasted with that of the non-Jewish or idolatrous soul in the realm of impurity. The point is driven home in passages wherein the souls of Jews are demarcated as ‘human’, while those of the nations are considered ‘bestly’.²⁸⁷ The contrast is cast exegetically in terms of the verse ‘God said,

²⁸⁶ *Zohar* 1: 162a (*Sitrei Torah*). The ontological interpretation of the biblical depiction of Israel as the sons of God is widespread in kabbalistic literature. An interesting illustration is found in an important but still relatively neglected text, the anonymous *Berit Menuḥah*, 38a: “You are sons of the Lord your God” (Deut. 14: 1). Israel are physical, but the holy One, blessed be he, has no body, form, or image. Does he have sons? How is it possible except in this way? When the effluence emanates from the First Cause and overflows to the supernal *Shekhinah*, from the union of the two of them due to the abundance of their supernal light there emerges a light out of the two of them, and this is the soul. With respect to this Israel are called “sons.”... One of these two lights is alluded to in the language of the masculine and the other in the language of the feminine.’ The two lights that are joined together are also identified as the two eyes of the form of the supernal human (*ṣurat adam ha-elyon*), which are associated with two angelic figures, the right eye with Azbogah and the left eye with Tarzisyah (or Takhsisyah).

²⁸⁷ See above, n. 115. An important exception to the dichotomy of the human nature of Israel versus the bestly character of the non-Jews is found in *Zohar* 3: 147a. In that context, Israel itself is said to comprise both human (*adam*) and beast (*behemah*), a point that is derived exegetically from ‘man and beast you deliver, O Lord’ (Ps. 36: 6). See also the zoharic passage cited in the next note, and *Zohar* 3: 125a (*Ra’aya Meheimna*). In the latter context, the bestly component of the community of Israel is identified further as the ‘mixed multitude’ (*erev rav*) that journeyed together with the Israelites in the desert on the way out of Egypt (Exod. 12: 38), also depicted as the ignoramuses (*ammei ha-areṣ*). On the identification of the *ammei ha-areṣ* as beasts, see *Tiqqunei Zohar*, § 47, 83b. The ‘mixed multitude’ are elsewhere described in passages from this stratum of zoharic literature as the progeny of Lilith conceived as a result of illicit sexual acts whose very existence prevents the attainment of unity in the divine (*Zohar* 1: 27b); the force of idolatry that derives from Saturn and Lilith, the seeds from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil that is the garbage mixed in the garden (3: 282a); the menstruant woman who renders the righteous impure (*Tiqqunei Zohar*, § 13, 27b); the wicked sons of Samael mixed in with the community of Israel (*ibid.* 140a). On the negative portrayal of the *erev rav*, see also *ibid.* §§ 21, 53b and 69, 112b. On the demonic origin of the *erev rav*, see *Zohar* 3: 195a. Regarding the use of this symbol by the author of *Ra’aya Meheimna* and *Tiqqunei Zohar*, see Tishby, *Wisdom*,

“Let the earth bring forth every kind of living creature: cattle, creeping things, and wild beasts of every kind” (Gen. 1: 24): The ‘living creature’ (*nefesh ḥayyah*) refers to Israel, for they embody the soul that emanates from the supernal, holy creature, that is, *Shekhinah*, whereas the rest of the idolatrous nations are the ‘cattle, creeping things, and wild beasts of every kind’, for they originate in the demonic foreskin.²⁸⁸ According to another passage, the souls of the nations are compared to ‘dried wood upon which no light shines’, and thus ‘they remain and they do not shake for they have no Torah’. By contrast, Jewish souls are compared to the burning light of a candle that flickers to every side, a sign of their vitality and dynamism.²⁸⁹ Thus the verse ‘the soul of man (*nishmat adam*) is the lamp of the Lord’ (Prov. 20: 27) is applied solely to the Jews, for they alone are called *adam* (based on the rabbinic reading of Ezek. 34: 31). So noxious is the impurity of the non-Jew that in several passages the zoharic authorship insists that the Jew must avoid all contact with living non-Jews.

There is an essential difference between Jew and non-Jew: the soul of the latter is intrinsically impure since it derives from the demonic realm, and thus he can transmit this impurity only through his soul when he is alive; the former, by contrast, is intrinsically holy since his soul derives from the divine realm, and thus he transmits impurity only through the body after the soul separates from it at death.²⁹⁰ According to another passage, which may

1433–8; Giller, *Enlightened*, 41, 49, 90. On the unseemly and dark aspect that must be purified from Israel like the chaff from the straw or something edible from its husk, see *Zohar* 2: 247a (*Ra’aya Meheimna*). In *Zohar* 2:120b (*Ra’aya Meheimna*), the mixed multitude are identified explicitly as the refuse or chaff that is purified from the straw. See also *Zohar Ḥadash*, 113c (*Tiqqunim*). In the Sabbatian theology of Nathan of Gaza, the mixed multitude is identified as those who speak against Sabbatai Ṣevi. See Scholem, *Sabbatai Ṣevi*, 741–2.

²⁸⁸ *Zohar* 1: 46b–47a. For a different symbolic interpretation of *nefesh ḥayyah*, which is associated with the beast (*behemah*) on the left side in contrast to the human (*adam*) on the right, see *Zohar* 2: 178a–b (*Sifra di-Ṣeni’uta*): ‘God said, “Let the earth bring forth every kind of living creature: cattle, creeping things, etc.” (Gen. 1: 24). This is [the import of] what is written, “man and beast you deliver, O Lord” (Ps. 36: 6), one is found in the category of the other, the beast is in the category of the human. “When a man from amongst you offers a sacrifice from the beasts to the Lord” (Lev. 1: 2), for it is contained in the category of the human. When a man descends below in the supernal image, two spirits are found from the two sides, the right and the left . . . the right is the holy soul (*nishmata qaddisha*) and the left is the living creature (*nefesh ḥayyah*).’

²⁸⁹ *Zohar* 3: 219a.

²⁹⁰ See *ibid.* 1: 47a, 131a, 220a; 2: 21b; 3: 25b, 37a, 104b, 105b, 119a, 259b; *Zohar Ḥadash*, 78d; *Book of the Pomegranate*, 211–12; Wolfson, ‘Mystical Rationalization’, 242–4, 248. Consider as well the remark of Joseph Angelet, *Qupat ha-Rokhlin*, MS Oxford, Bodleian Library 1618, fol. 123b, that by nature Jew and non-Jew should hate one another since they are opposites. Angelet does allow for the possibility that Jew and non-Jew will love one another, but it is nevertheless instructive that the ‘natural’ condition is one of enmity.

represent a somewhat later interpolation into the zoharic text,²⁹¹ but which nevertheless reflects the anthropological conception affirmed by the Castilian kabbalists who belonged to the fraternity of mystics behind the composition of *Zohar*, the children of Israel are commanded not to eat the thigh muscle (*gid ha-nasheh*), for it represents the demonic force. The idolatrous nations can partake of this part of the animal since their nature is innately demonic.²⁹² One, quite literally, is what one eats, and therefore it is permissible for the Gentile to partake of the food that derives from the demonic side since the root of his soul is precisely in that realm of being.²⁹³

CHRISTIANITY AS THE IDOLATROUS OTHER

It might be objected that the zoharic portrayal of the idolatrous nations is simply an exegetical elaboration of an older tradition that had no immediate historical application. However, it is clear that the medieval authors radically altered the tradition in light of their own social and theological context.²⁹⁴ For example, the following remark (attributed to Simeon ben Yoḥai) is found in an older work of rabbinic scriptural interpretation: ‘The holy One, blessed be he, said to Israel, “I am God for all the inhabitants of the world, but I have not assigned my name except to you. I am not called the god of those who worship the stars and constellations, but the God of Israel.”’²⁹⁵ A universalistic posture is presupposed insofar as the God of Israel is recognized as the God of all people; yet particularism immediately qualifies that universalism, for the divine name is given only to the Jews. Hence, the God of Israel (*elohei yisra’el*) is sharply contrasted with the god of the idolaters. The appropriation of this orientation by the medieval zoharic circle imposes a fundamental change. The issue of idolatry no longer refers specifically to astral worship, as it did in the rabbinic statement, but now connotes the false theistic faith of Christianity.²⁹⁶

²⁹¹ See Altmann, ‘On the Question’, 275.

²⁹² *Zohar* 1: 170b. Cf. *Tiqqunei Zohar*, § 56, 91a.

²⁹³ For a full-length study of the role of eating in the symbolic world of zoharic kabbalah, see Hecker, *Mystical Bodies*.

²⁹⁴ Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, 244, n. 92, offers several other examples of the zoharic transformation of classical rabbinic passages into a polemic with the Christianity contemporary to the time of the composition of the medieval kabbalistic anthology.

²⁹⁵ *Exodus Rabbah* 29: 4.

²⁹⁶ On the portrayal of Christianity as idolatry in zoharic literature, see Matt, *Zohar*, 240; Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, 234, n. 47; Wolfson, ‘Re/membering’, 217. Although Islam is treated as a demonic force in some passages in *Zohar*, especially in the later strata of *Ra’aya Meheimna* and *Tiqqunei Zohar*, for the most part this religion is not considered idolatrous. See discussion

In zoharic theosophy, Christianity, the power of Edom,²⁹⁷ is aligned with the god who is foreign (*el nekhar*), the other side on the left vis-à-vis the way of faith, the side of holiness on the right,²⁹⁸ the refuse of divine thought,²⁹⁹ the profane shadow of sacred light, the tail in relation to the head.³⁰⁰ The true meaning of the connotation of the worship of stars and constellations is faintly veiled in the following passage:

Thus the holy One, blessed be he, warned Israel to be holy, as it is written, 'You shall be holy for I am holy' (Lev. 11: 44). What is [the import of the word] 'I'? This refers to the holy One, blessed be he, the holy heavenly kingship (*malkhut shamayim qaddisha*). The other kingship (*malkhuta aħra*) of the nations who worship the stars and

above, n. 31. In this matter, the authors of the *Zohar* follow the halakhic opinion of Maimonides; see Ch. 2, n. 107. The theological ruling is reflective of the broader cultural symbiosis between Judaism and Islam in the early Middle Ages. For a succinct review of this recurrent attitude in the historiographic portrait of medieval Jewish society, see Berger, 'Judaism and General Culture'. Negative statements about Ishmael in earlier sources fostered harsh views regarding Islam in medieval texts. See e.g. Tosefta, Soṭah 6: 6, where Ishmael is associated with idolatry, illicit sexual relations, and murder. On accusations of idolatry in the polemical exchanges between the three monotheistic faiths, see Hawting, *Idea of Idolatry*, 67–87; Tolan, 'Muslims as Pagan Idolaters'. For a different and decidedly less sanguine approach that relates constructions of identity on the part of Muslims and Jews to their respective experiences of historical time and perceptions of the past, see Lassner, 'Time'.

²⁹⁷ The authors of *Zohar* fit into what Cohen, *Studies in the Variety*, 259–60, identified as the exegetical approach to the problem of Edom-Rome taken by Babylonian, Spanish, and Provençal Jewish scholars as opposed to the orientation found in southern Italian sources. According to the former, the name of Edom was applied primarily to Christianity and only secondarily to Rome after the Roman Empire adopted that faith as the official state religion. See also the pertinent comments of Scholem, *Origins*, 296.

²⁹⁸ *Zohar* 1: 172b.

²⁹⁹ In *ibid.* 2:91a, the word *pesel*, 'idol', is related to the expression *pesolet di-qedushshah*, the 'refuse of holiness', which refers to the divine emanation. See Wolfson, 'Iconicity of the Text', 236.

³⁰⁰ *Zohar* 3: 119a–b. On the zoharic representation of medieval Christianity as the demonic force in the world, see Graetz, *History of the Jews*, 4: 17; Scholem, *Messianic Idea*, 40; Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, 66–8, 244, n. 92. The association of the other side and the nations of the world (without specifying a specific link to Christianity) is noted by Tishby, *Wisdom*, 451. On the connection between Christianity and idolatry, see above, n. 194. Gross, 'Satan and Christianity', notes that the portrayal of Christianity as the demonic religion and the view of Jesus as the incarnation of Samael or the devil, which are found in Spanish kabbalistic works from the second half of the fifteenth century, can be traced back to thirteenth-century sources composed by Ḥasidei Ashkenaz and the kabbalists in northern Spain, such as Nahmanides and Bahya ben Asher. He does not deal explicitly with the *Zohar*, which probably had the greatest impact on subsequent kabbalists. For an English rendering of the argument, see Gross, *Iberian Jewry*, 131–7. See also the pertinent remarks on Saba's attitude toward Muslims and Christians discussed by Walfish, *Esther*, 136–9. Finally, it should be noted that the long-standing representation of Jews on the part of Christians as demonic beings apparently grew more visible in the thirteenth century, the time when zoharic kabbalah began to flourish as a historical phenomenon. See Foa, 'Witch and the Jew'. On the reverberation of the Christian association of the Jews and the devil, see Felsenstein, *Anti-Semitic Stereotypes*, 27–39.

constellations is called 'the other' (*aḥer*), as it is written, 'You shall not bow down to the other god (*el aḥer*), for the name of the Lord is the jealous one' (Exod. 34: 14). Come and see: The sovereignty of the 'I' is in this world and in the world-to-come, and everything depends upon it. The sovereignty of the other, the side of impurity, the other side, is in this world, and it has nothing of the world-to-come. Therefore, he who cleaves to this 'I' has a portion in this world and in the world-to-come, and he who cleaves to the other is destroyed in this world and he has no portion in the world-to-come, but he has a portion in the world of impurity on account of the other kingship of the nations who worship the stars and constellations.³⁰¹

Reversing a standard trope of the Christian polemic against the Jews in the Middle Ages that contrasted the otherworldly spirituality of Christianity with the this-worldly orientation of Judaism, the zoharic authorship associates Christianity with the power of impurity that is operative in this world. By contrast, Jews alone know the path of holiness that leads to eschatological reward. Far from being people only of the letter of the law, which was long associated with carnality in Christian attacks on Judaism, the zoharic text presents the Jews as having exclusive access to the spiritual realm—not at the expense of the physical world, but in conjunction with it. In terms of the more specific symbolic language employed in the aforesaid text, the holiness of Judaism depends on cleaving to the aspect of God referred to as 'I,' that is, the 'kingship of heaven' (*malkhut shamayim*), a technical designation of the tenth of the sefirotic emanations, *Malkhut* or *Shekhinah*, the immanence of God in creation.³⁰² The dual portion of Israel, this world and the world-to-come, is linked to the role of *Shekhinah* as the kingship of heaven, which signifies her capacity to exercise providential care over the universe. Conversely, idol worship consists of cleaving to the other god, the foreign dominion of demonic kingship, the other side (*sitra aḥra*). If one cleaves to the 'kingship of heaven' (*malkhut shamayim*), one attains a portion in the world-to-come, but if one cleaves to the 'other kingship' (*malkhuta aḥra*), one is destroyed in this world and has no portion in the world-to-come.

Kabbalists of the zoharic fraternity uniformly portrayed Christianity as the idolatrous religion that worships the demonic other side.³⁰³ The belief of

³⁰¹ *Zohar* 1: 204b. Concerning this passage, see Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, 234, n. 47.

³⁰² Scholem, *Major Trends*, 216, explains that the attribution of the first-person pronoun to *Shekhinah*, the last of the ten *sefirot*, signifies that this stage of the emanative process is characterized as the 'true individuation in which God as a person says "I" to Himself'.

³⁰³ For the zoharic authorship, the basic movement on the spiritual path is deliverance from the alien realm so that one may be bound to the 'knot of faith' (*qishshura di-meheimanuta*) or the 'knot of the holy name' (*qishshura di-shema qaddisha*). These expressions are employed in *Zohar* 3: 95b to describe the status achieved by the male Israelites when they were delivered from Egypt. See *ibid.* 3: 97a (*Piqqudim*) where the process is troped as the cycle of a woman being purified from her menstrual discharge. Consuming the unleavened bread (*maṣṣah*), which is

Christians is discredited in one passage as the ‘faith of folly’ (*meheimanuta di-sheṭuta*) and hence their minds are castigated as nothing.³⁰⁴ The zoharic authors set up an analogy between Judaism and Christianity along the following lines: the holy nation cleaves to the masculine potency of God, designated as ‘heaven’ (*shamayim*), through *Shekhinah*, which is also called *malkhut*; the idolatrous nations are conjoined to the masculine potency of the other god through the feminine presence of the demonic realm (*malkhuta aḥra*). Although the names Samael and Lilith are not mentioned explicitly in the aforementioned zoharic passage, from parallel texts it may be concluded that these terms can be applied appropriately to the masculine and feminine forces of impurity.³⁰⁵ I surmise, moreover, that the other god and the foreign kingship stand respectively for Jesus and Mary,³⁰⁶ the pair on the left side of impurity that corresponds to *Tiferet* and *Malkhut* on the right side of holiness.³⁰⁷ Even if we were to bracket this dimension of the Jewish–Christian polemic, it is evident that when the zoharic authors contrast the holy souls of Israel with the impure souls of the idolatrous nations, the distinction that is really being made is between Jews and Christians in the theological landscape of Spain in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Christians cleave to *el aḥer*, the ‘other god’, for the spiritual root of Christianity is Esau or Edom, the nation to which is assigned the evil force of Samael and Lilith. As I have already intimated, the tropological intent of the kabbalistic polemic can only be appreciated fully if one bears in mind that in zoharic literature the

referred to as the ‘bread from heaven’ (Exod. 16: 4), that is, the feminine (bread) that emanates from the masculine (heaven), is understood in mystical terms as being conjoined to *Shekhinah*. See Wolfson, ‘Left Contained’, 33–45, 50–1; id., ‘Mystical Rationalization’, 245.

³⁰⁴ *Zohar* 2: 37a.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.* 1: 148a–b (*Sitrei Torah*); see Tishby, *Wisdom*, 376–9, 462, 467–8.

³⁰⁶ My surmise is enhanced by the literary and iconic depictions of Mary as the Queen of Heaven, an image connected to the Christological belief in the Assumption of the Virgin Mother from her earthly habitation to the celestial court wherein she is enthroned alongside Christ. See Abulafia, *Christians and Jews*, 58; Eberthausen et al. *Mary: Art, Culture, and Religion*, 240; Fulton, *From Judgment*, 202, 208, 218, 231, 274–80, 317, 402–4, 410, 412.

³⁰⁷ The decoding of Samael as a symbolic reference to Jesus is enhanced by the adaptation on the part of the zoharic kabbalists of the aggadic theme that Samael is the archon of Esau, which is identified as the Christian empire. See *Midrash Tanḥuma*, Wayyishlah, 8; *Zohar* 1: 146a, 170a; 2: 11a, 111a, 163b; 3: 124a (*Ra’aya Meheimna*), 199b, 243a (*Ra’aya Meheimna*), 246b (*Ra’aya Meheimna*), 248a (*Ra’aya Meheimna*); *Zohar Hadash*, 23d (*Midrash ha-Ne’elam*), 47a (*Midrash ha-Ne’elam*); *Tiqunei Zohar*, § 69, 105a; Tishby, *Wisdom*, 464. On the association of Satan or the ‘other god’ and Jesus, see Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, 234, n. 47 and 244, n. 92. Many of the images that depict Lilith—e.g. the mother of the mixed multitude (*Zohar* 1: 27b), the estranged woman identified as Se’eir (1: 172b), the woman of harlotry (2: 148b), and the evil maidservant (3: 273a)—suggest a clandestine reference to Mary. Worthy of further analysis are the implications of the congruence between descriptions of *Shekhinah* and Lilith on the relationship between Synagogue and Church. On the complex relationship between *Shekhinah* and Lilith, see Scholem, *Mystical Shape*, 189–92; Tishby, *Wisdom*, 382–5, 468–9.

theological dispute with the idolatrous nature of Christianity cannot be separated from the moral struggle with sexual temptation, expressed as the Jewish man's desire to commit adultery with a Christian woman,³⁰⁸ a topos for the engendering of sectarian heresy attested already in classical rabbinic sources, linked exegetically to the image of the estranged woman (*ishshah zarah*) in the Book of Proverbs.³⁰⁹

The zoharic anthropology, which had a major impact on the subsequent development of kabbalistic symbolism, presumes that the souls of Israel are substantially different from the souls of all the Christian groups classified under the rabbinic rubric of idolatrous nations. The kabbalistic perspective is stated succinctly by the Spanish exegete Bahya ben Asher, who may have participated in the literary production of zoharic literature.³¹⁰ Commenting on the use of the name 'El Shaddai' in conjunction with the biblical narrative about Abraham's circumcision (Gen. 17: 1), Bahya writes:

The reason why in this commandment this name is mentioned is because it ends in *yod*, and it is formed in the structure of the body of the one circumcised who is sealed in the signature of the holy covenant. By means of this signature the gradation of Israel is made known, for they are separated from the rest of the idolaters, uncircumcised in the heart and uncircumcised in the flesh, who are from the side of the demons (*shedim*), whereas Israel is from the side of El Shaddai. Through this signature the person (*adam*) becomes complete (*tamim*), and this is [the import of] what is said, 'be blameless' (Gen. 17: 1). Since he is perfected through it, it is appropriate that he should be careful with respect to a particular transgression, and this is the transgression of illicit sexual relations (*arayot*), and this is [the meaning of] what is written, 'I have been blameless before him and have guarded myself against my transgression' (2 Sam. 22: 24). For the sake of the holiness of the covenants the name *yod-he-waw* is bound to and sealed on a man from below to above.³¹¹

The sign of the covenant of circumcision 'sealed' on the phallus is the letter *yod*. My choice of the term 'signature' to translate the Hebrew *ot* is meant to capture the double connotation of the word as sign and letter.³¹² In virtue of this signature, Israel is distinguished from the rest of the idolatrous nations, which in the medieval context must be understood as a coded cipher for the people of the Christian empire. Indeed, one letter accounts for the ontological difference: Christians are linked to *shed* (*shin dalet*), as they derive from the side of the demon, in contrast to Jews who are marked by the name *shaddai*

³⁰⁸ See Wolfson, 'Re/membering', 221–2.

³⁰⁹ Boyarin, *Dying For God*, 67–92.

³¹⁰ On Bahya's relationship to *Zohar*, see Gottlieb, *Kabbalah in the Writings of R. Bahya*, 167–93; and the more recent view expressed by Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, 90–4.

³¹¹ *Rabbenu Bahya: Be'ur al ha-Torah*, 1: 158–9 (ad Gen. 17: 1).

³¹² As noted already by Scholem, 'Name of God', 166.

(*shin dalet yod*), as they derive from the side of the divine. According to a passage in *Zohar*, which is an interpretation of the same verse as the one interpreted by Baḥya, the word *shed*, associated with the lower, demonic crowns, is similarly contrasted with the name *shaddai*, linked to the one who has entered beneath the wings of *Shekhinah* as a result of the cut of circumcision and the consequent inscription of the letter *yod* as the sign of the covenant on the flesh. The blessing bestowed on the circumcised Jewish boy is that he will not be subject to the virulent impact of these demonic forces and he will ultimately avoid going to Gehenna.³¹³

In his Torah commentary, Baḥya adds that on account of the seal of circumcision Jewish men have a special responsibility with respect to the sin of illicit sexual relations. This is logical enough, but implicit here may be a polemical jab at Christian men, who, lacking the sign of the covenant imprinted on their flesh, are more susceptible to sexually transgressive behaviour.³¹⁴ Such a portrayal of Christian libertinism is not uncommon in medieval Jewish polemics.³¹⁵ Further support for my reading of Baḥya is the

³¹³ *Zohar* 1: 95a–b.

³¹⁴ One of the standard explanations offered for circumcision is that removal of the foreskin diminishes the sexual drive. This view was expressed by such central medieval figures as Judah Halevi, *Sefer ha-Kuzari*, I. 115; Abraham Ibn Ezra, *Yesod Mora*, ch. 7, 29a; Maimonides, *Guide*, III. 49; and it was repeated in one form or another by numerous rabbinic figures in subsequent generations. See Gross, 'Reasons for the Commandment', 25–34; Biale, *Eros*, 91–2; Cohen, *Why Aren't Jewish Women Circumcised?*, 147–50, 222. A later echo of this motif is found in the view of Levinas that circumcision symbolizes the maternal element that limits male virility, weakness devoid of cowardice. See Walsh, 'Action, Passion, and Responsibility'. Given this understanding of circumcision, it follows that the uncircumcised Christian would naturally be prone to more promiscuous behaviour than the circumcised Jew. See Saperstein, *Decoding the Rabbis*, 97–100. As Saperstein duly notes, the stereotypes of the sexually virile Christian and the sexually impotent Jew must be seen against the medieval background of a Christian civilization that viewed celibacy and sexual abstinence as the highest ideal, in contrast to the Jewish tradition that accorded a more positive valence to sexuality. It is of interest to recall in this context that in the *Summa Theologiae* Aquinas posits that the rite of circumcision was a sacramental remedy for original sin, which he offers as one of the reasons that Jesus himself was circumcised. See Hood, *Aquinas and the Jews*, 52–3; Schoot and Valkenberg, 'Thomas Aquinas', 61–4. See also the comment of Postel, *Des admirables secrets des nombres platoniciens*, 140–2: 'Tertio in loco est *Sadaï ubertas* instar filii semineitas emanata ab utroque parente, unde circumcisionis mysterium pro filio dei et domino Christo institutum.' In medieval Christian polemics, circumcision symbolized castration and thus the Jewish man was typically portrayed as effeminate. See Ch. 2, n. 32. An interesting extension of this motif in medieval Christian art is the portrayal of the circumcisor of Jesus as a woman. The circumcision of Jesus, therefore, is a form of female mutilation. See Abramson, 'A Ready Hatred'. On the feminization or emasculation of Jesus in Christian art, see Steinberg, *Sexuality of Christ*, 246–50. See as well the pertinent remarks of Jung, *Mysterium Coniunctionis*, 373.

³¹⁵ See e.g. Joseph Kimḥi, *Book of the Covenant*, 34, and references to other scholarly literature given in n. 21; *Nizzahon Vetus*, 69, 223. It must be pointed out that some medieval Christian authors appropriated the rabbinic notion that circumcision diminished the sexual drive in particular or the physical passions in general, but it was applied to the rite of baptism,

kabbalistic explication he offers on the passage from an earlier midrashic collection, *Genesis Rabbah*, which underscores the world-sustaining quality of the covenant of circumcision.³¹⁶ Baḥya writes: ‘The power of the children of the covenant is in the heart, and the seventy archons are the external shells, thirty-five from the right for acquittal and thirty-five from the left for conviction, and this is [the intent of] the expression *orlah* (foreskin). A person is not permitted to grasp the heart until the shells are removed.’³¹⁷ Reversing the standard Christological supersessionism based on the Pauline notion that circumcision of the heart is superior to circumcision of the flesh,³¹⁸ Baḥya reiterates the stock Jewish claim that *adam*, the human in the fullest sense, is the one who has gained access to the heart, but only by means of circumcision of the phallus is the demonic foreskin excised so that such access may be granted. Not only is circumcision of the flesh not surpassed by circumcision of the heart, but the latter is not attainable without the former, and therein lies the Synagogue’s continued supremacy over the Church.³¹⁹

The radical ontologizing difference between Jew and Christian is underscored in the concluding part of the passage wherein Baḥya alludes to an idea that he expands in another context: ‘From the wisdom of creation (*hokhmat ha-yeširah*) in the structure of man (*tavnit ha-adam*) you shall find that he is marked in three distinctive limbs, for each and every one is in the measure of this contraction (*ha-šimšum*), and through them are inscribed *yod*, *he*, and *waw* in the body of man from below to above, and the heart, which is distinctive as well, corresponds to the final *he* [of the Tetragrammaton].’³²⁰

the circumcision of spirit that replaced circumcision of the flesh. For references, see Gross, ‘Reasons for the Commandment’, 34, n. 43. See also the tantalizing remark of Abbah Isaiah of Scetis, *Ascetic Discourses*, 163, that Abraham’s circumcision signifies that the ‘left was no longer alive in him’. On recognition on the part of some Christians that prior to the life of Jesus circumcision was considered a partial rectification for the sin of Adam, see Ḥasday Crescas, *Sefer Biṭṭul Iqqarei ha-Nošrim*, 42–3, and sources cited by the editor on p. 43, n. 23.

³¹⁶ *Genesis Rabbah* 46: 3, p. 460.

³¹⁷ *Rabbenu Baḥya: Be’ur al ha-Torah*, 1: 159 (ad Gen. 17: 1). The possible influence of Gikatilla on this passage of Baḥya was noted by Idel, ‘World of Angels’, 42, n. 154.

³¹⁸ On the derivation of the supersessionist position in the Christian polemic against Judaism from Paul, see Porter and Pearson, ‘Ancient Understanding’.

³¹⁹ For a similar argument with respect to the inherent link between circumcision of the flesh and circumcision of the heart, see *Book of the Covenant*, 48.

³²⁰ *Rabbenu Baḥya: Be’ur al ha-Torah*, 2: 278 (ad Exod. 25: 18): See *ibid.* 2: 532: (ad Lev. 19: 27): ‘By way of the kabbalah, the reason for the prohibition of the destruction [of the side-growth of the beard] is that the letters *yod-he-waw-he* of the concealed name are inscribed in the structure of the body: the *yod*, *he*, and *waw* in the phallus [lit. ‘circumcision’, *milah*], mouth, and tongue, and this is the prohibition of the destruction of the upper beard and of the lower beard, for the prohibition is equal for both of them.’ It is evident that the lower beard is a euphemism connected with the male organ, a usage that is attested already in rabbinic literature. For references see Wolfson, *Circle*, 197, n. 6.

The reference to the 'contraction' relates to the midrashic idea that God limits his presence so that it dwells between the two cherubim, which constitute the mercy-seat of the ark. It would take us too far afield to enter into a detailed discussion of Baḥya's interpretative expansion of the midrashic motif, a matter that must be addressed elsewhere. The significant point for this analysis is that the four letters of the name, YHWH, are sealed exclusively in the somatic being of the Jewish male: *yod* is the sign inscribed on the phallus, *he* relates to the mouth, *waw* to the tongue, and *he* to the heart. The structure of man (*tavnit ha-adam*) to which Baḥya refers consists of the inscription of these letters on the body of the circumcised Jewish male. Baḥya thus confirms the zoharic view that the Jewish male represents the ideal human in the most precise philological sense: only the soul of the Jewish male can be called *adam*, and hence only the body of the Jewish male is the site that bears the imprint of YHWH, the essential name that comprises within itself the ten divine potencies. Once we understand the lexical issue of the term *adam*, we can evaluate accurately the idea of humanity in classical kabbalistic sources, and by extension the relationship of mysticism and ethics.

The extent to which the kabbalistic orientation is predicated on the radical differentiation between Israel and the nations is underscored when we examine the thought of the thirteenth-century Castilian kabbalist Joseph Gikatilla, assumed by scholars to have had strong links to the fraternity of kabbalists responsible for the composition and redaction of *Zohar*.³²¹ In one of his major theosophical works, *Sha'arei Orah*, a presentation of different names and epithets of the ten *sefirot*, Gikatilla offers an ostensibly less dualistic view of the relationship between Jews and other nations.³²² Needless to say, the more attenuated approach to this issue reflects a less dualistic orientation towards the problem of good and evil in general. That is, as a number of scholars have noted, Gikatilla expresses the view that the forces of impurity play a positive role in the scheme of creation if they are kept separate from the forces of purity. Evil consists of a blurring of boundaries such that what is external penetrates to the inside and what is internal is displaced to the outside.³²³ As Gikatilla puts the matter:

³²¹ See Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, 99–103, and the work of other scholars cited on pp. 203–4, nn. 78–9.

³²² A more attenuated approach is also found in *Book Bahir*, § 67, p. 159: 'All the holy forms are appointed over each and every nation, and holy Israel takes the trunk of the tree and its heart.' The bahiric language is reminiscent of the metaphorical depiction of Israel as the heart on the part of Halevi, *Sefer ha-Kuzari*, II. 36, 44.

³²³ See Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape*, 78–81; Gottlieb, *Studies in the Kabbala Literature*, 278–9; Ben-Shlomo, 'Introduction', in Gikatilla, *Sha'arei Orah*, 1: 34–9; Gikatilla, *Secret of the Snake*, 1–14.

There are places in the chariot wherein the forces of impurity are connected, and they are called the bond of the serpent and they are also called Laban the Aramaean, he is the one who deceives human beings and thus he is a charlatan . . . Jacob inherited the place of the internal whiteness, the head of *Keter*, the exposed place of whiteness (*maḥsof ha-lavan*),³²⁴ and thus he inherited the blessing, and Laban the Aramaean inherited the whiteness of deception, the place of the external powers, the diminutive whiteness that is connected to the chariot, for there is no evil thing that does not have some good.³²⁵ Do not consider it otherwise. There is nothing evil when it is in its place and this is a great mystery of the mysteries of faith and the mysteries of Torah. The secret of 'And God saw all that he made and it was very good' (Gen. 1: 31), everything is certainly good from the perspective of the deed that has been created and when it functions in its place.³²⁶

A consequence of Gikatilla's approach relevant to the main theme of this chapter is that the seventy nations of the world are not intrinsically demonic, but rather they are the mundane manifestation of the seventy archons that surround the king in the holy sanctuary. In contrast to zoharic symbolism, Gikatilla remarks that the seventy archons are comprised within a form that is called *adam*.³²⁷ To be sure, the anthropomorphic configuration of the angels is an idea found in *Zohar*, but the term *adam* is not applied specifically to the angelic guardians of the seventy nations.³²⁸ According to Gikatilla, the celestial archetypes constitute a human form that is parallel to the anthropomorphic configuration of the divine potencies. Alternatively, Gikatilla remarks that the seventy archons are an intrinsic part of the form of the supernal chariot (*ṣurat ha-merkavah ha-elyonah*), for they are 'like servants

³²⁴ Gen. 30: 37.

³²⁵ In apparent contradiction to this principle, Gikatilla writes in *Sha'arei Orah*, 1: 148 that 'in the redness of Esau there is no admixture of good and no beauty . . . for Esau the wicked one inherited the sword and bloodshed'.

³²⁶ Gikatilla, 'Final Section', 158–9.

³²⁷ Gikatilla, *Sha'arei Orah*, 1: 208–9; id., *Commentary on Ezekiel's Chariot*, 56. For discussion of this motif in Gikatilla's writings, see Idel, 'World of Angels', 38–49; Goetschel, 'Le Motif des *Sarim*'. The influence of Gikatilla on this point is discernible in Lavi, *Ketem Paz*, 1: 27d–28a, 'You already know that the faces change in accord with their place, for whatever is at a distance from the light destroys their manly appearance and human form, just as the languages change one from another until there are seventy languages. Concerning this secret they said the Torah was given in seventy languages and the secret of the seventy faces to Torah, and their image is like the image of the holy angels, for "God made the one corresponding to the other" (Eccles. 7: 14). Just as the four supernal faces return to the face of a human, as it is written "each of them had a human face" (Ezek. 1: 10), so when these archons are joined together they form the face of a human. When they are in darkness they are transformed into the form of a serpent with two heads.' See Huss, *Sockets*, 30, nn. 27–9, 79–80, 171. The specific issue that I have mentioned is not discussed by Huss, although he does note Lavi's adaptation of a Neoplatonic approach to evil as the privation of divine light; see *ibid.* 142–3.

³²⁸ On the zoharic idea of the configuration of the angels in the image of an androgynous anthropos, see Tishby, *Wisdom*, 624–5; Liebes, *Sections*, 37–8; Idel, 'World of Angels', 35–8.

who stand outside the house of the king, prepared to accomplish all that he wills'.³²⁹ In another passage, the positive role of the seventy archons is expressed in terms of the image of their standing in the supernal courthouse to participate in the meting out of divine judgement. This image obviously reflects the number of judges of the Sanhedrin, the assembly of ordained scholars endowed with legislative authority.³³⁰ The nations are also referred to as the shells of the foreskin (*qelippot shel orlah*).³³¹ Gikatilla does not employ the term *qelippot* in the sense of irredeemably bad and thus expendable demonic forces, but in the sense of an external covering that either protects the inner core (when Jews are righteous) or creates a barrier between Israel and God (when Jews are sinful).³³² According to another passage,³³³ the contrast between Israel within the circle and the seventy nations on the outside is explained in terms of the 'six profane days' (*sheshet yemei ḥol*) surrounding the attribute of *Yesod* in the image of shells. The six days of the week correspond to the six holy days, which are delineated either as the divine emanations from *Binah* to *Hod*, which are completed by the seventh attribute of *Yesod*, or from *Yesod* to *Hesed*, which are completed by the seventh attribute of *Binah*. Gikatilla connects this theme, which he describes as a very deep matter that requires an orally received tradition (*qabbalah mi-peh el peh*), with the traditional *havdalah* service recited at the conclusion of Sabbath to mark the transition from sacred to mundane time. In this prayer, God is blessed for having distinguished holiness from the profane, Israel from the nations, light from darkness, and Sabbath from the six weekdays.³³⁴ Admittedly, the binarian tone is mitigated in Gikatilla's mature theosophic thought, but it is nevertheless the case that, in line with other Castilian kabbalists of his time, he ontologizes the ritualistic separation of Israel and the nations. The

³²⁹ *Sha'arei Orah*, 1: 208.

³³⁰ *Ibid.* 1: 153–4. For a more negative view of the seventy nations, see *Berit Menuḥah*, 21b, and see below, n. 359.

³³¹ The four shells are derived exegetically from Ezek. 1: 4. See *Sha'arei Orah*, 1: 212–13; 2: 47. For a similar motif in zoharic symbolism, see Tishby, *Wisdom*, 463–4. Technically speaking, only three of the four shells are called 'hard', for the fourth, *nogah*, is subtle insofar as it is closest to the inner core of holiness. The description of the four shells is expanded in Gikatilla's *Commentary on Ezekiel's Chariot*, 49–51. According to that discussion, when the Jews inhabit the land of Israel and *Shekhinah* dwells in the Holy of Holies, the four shells surround *Shekhinah* from the sides. By contrast, when Jews are exiled from the land of Israel and *Shekhinah* is displaced, the shells surround *Shekhinah* from the sides and from below. The four shells—the 'stormy wind' (*rualḥ se'arah*), 'huge cloud' (*anan gadol*), 'flashing fire' (*esh mitlaqqahat*), and 'radiance' (*nogah*)—correspond respectively to the kingdoms of Babylonia, Media, Edom, and Greece.

³³² *Sha'arei Orah*, 1: 212–13.

³³³ *Ibid.* 2: 46–8.

³³⁴ Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 33a.

seventy archons may not be demonic, but they are intrinsically impure and hence they must stand outside the inner circle of holiness.

As I noted above, Gikatilla understands evil as the blurring of the boundary between external and internal, impure and holy. The kabbalistic doctrine is proffered, as one might expect, as the mystical rationale for the prohibition of wearing a garment made of wool and linen, *sod sha'atnez* (Lev. 19: 19; Deut. 22: 11). The ritualistic obligation is interpreted in terms of the necessity to keep 'internal pure things' (*ha-tehorim ha-penimiyyim*) and 'external impure things' (*ha-hiṣoniyyim ha-teme'im*) separate, for when the two forces are kept distinct everything is for the benefit of the world. If, however, the external forces enter inside or the internal forces depart outside there is destruction of the cosmological order.³³⁵ Gikatilla's relativistic understanding of evil actually reifies the dualistic posture, for the impure power is considered good only if it is separated from the pure. The secret of the bond that connects external impurity and internal purity leads Gikatilla to conclude that 'the evil distinguishes the good and the good distinguishes the evil'.³³⁶ The point is driven home as well in the contrast that Gikatilla makes between Moses and Balaam. Building on the midrashic theme (which is linked exegetically to Deut. 34: 10) that the only prophet equal in stature to Moses was Balaam,³³⁷ Gikatilla remarks:

Know that just as Moses our master, may peace be upon him, was the chief of all prophets and above them all he comprehended *Tif'eret*,³³⁸ and he was the epitome of purity, so Balaam the wicked one was the chief of all sorcerers and magicians, and he was above them all and he comprehended the forearm from outside. The two of them correspond to one another, Moses from the inside in the limit of purity and abstinence, and Balaam from the outside in the limit of impurity and filth.³³⁹

We may conclude that, in spite of the more conciliatory approach to the seventy non-Jewish nations, Gikatilla is in basic accord with the anthropological standpoint of the *Zohar*, for he steadfastly assigns ontological priority to the Jews. In one passage he observes that it is on account of *Shekhinah*, which 'holds together all of the community of Israel,' that Jews are set apart from the nations, a view that is related exegetically to two biblical citations, 'You shall be holy to me, for I the Lord am holy, and I have set you apart from other peoples to be mine' (Lev. 20: 26) and 'When the Most High gave nations

³³⁵ Gikatilla, *Sod Sha'atnez*, 41a.

³³⁶ 'Final Section', 159.

³³⁷ See above, n. 112.

³³⁸ On the uniqueness of Mosaic prophecy in terms of his attachment to *Tif'eret*, which is depicted as well as his conjunction to the Tetragrammaton, see *Sha'arei Or*, 1: 248. On the special connection between Moses and the divine name, see Gikatilla, *Ginnat Egoz*, 110–11.

³³⁹ *Secret of the Snake*, 3.

their homes and set the divisions of man, he fixed the boundaries of peoples in relation to Israel's numbers. For the Lord's portion is his people, Jacob his own allotment' (Deut. 32: 8–9).³⁴⁰ In virtue of the covenant of circumcision (*berit milah*), Abraham was separated from the rest of the nations (*goyim*) who are derisively called the 'foreskin' (*orlah*).³⁴¹ Elsewhere Gikatilla employs the aggadic motif of Jacob having been in the appearance of Adam³⁴² to convey the idea that the people of Israel are the paradigmatic representation of the human ideal.³⁴³ Most importantly, the rank of ontic preeminence is expressed by the correlation of the Tetragrammaton and the people of Israel.

We must notify you that the great name, the name YHWH, blessed be he, is the unique name (*shem ha-meyuḥad*). Why is it called the 'unique name?' For it is exclusive (*meyuḥad*) to Israel and the rest of the nations have no portion in it. But the archons of the other nations are conjoined to the rest of the holy names and epithets, which are in the image of wings and in the image of a garment for the name YHWH, blessed be he, and the archons of the nations hold on to those very epithets and garments, and from them the seventy nations are sustained. However, not one of all the archons of the nations touches the name YHWH, blessed be he, but only the rest of the names and epithets, which are his garments. The name YHWH, blessed be he, alone is unique to Israel, and this is the secret [of the verse] 'the Lord your God chose you from among all other peoples on earth to be his treasured people' (Deut. 14: 2), and this is the secret [of the verse] 'the portion of the Lord is his people' (Deut. 32: 9)... Thus it is known to you that the name YHWH, blessed be he, is unique to Israel, and this is the secret [of the verse] 'For the sake of his great name, the Lord will never abandon his people' (1 Sam. 12: 22), that is, even though Israel is not so righteous, the Lord shall not abandon his people. What is the reason? For they are the portion of his great name, and just as his great name cannot be changed, so Israel has no destruction. And this is the secret [of the verse] 'I, the Lord, have not changed and you, the sons of Jacob, are not destroyed' (Mal. 3: 6).³⁴⁴

³⁴⁰ *Sha'arei Orah*, 1: 89–90. Gikatilla often emphasizes that the spiritual property of Israel is *Shekhinah*, which corresponds to the physical land of Israel. On the conjunction of Israel to God, which influences and is influenced by the conjunction of the ninth and tenth *sefirot*, see *ibid.* 2: 50–1. In his earlier work, *Ginnat Egoz*, 284, Gikatilla reiterates the classical biblical and rabbinic position that Israel is the holy people and thus they are distinguished from the other nations. On the distinctive task of Israel to represent the purpose of all creation, see *ibid.* 47, 259–60, 264–5.

³⁴¹ *Sha'arei Orah*, 1: 213–14.

³⁴² Babylonian Talmud, *Baba Meṣi'a* 84a. Gikatilla's formulation is closer to the language of *Zohar* 1: 145b. For analysis of this text, see Wolfson, 'Re/membering', 219–20. For a variation of this theme, see also *Zohar* 2: 141b, where we are told not only that Jacob's appearance was like the beauty of the 'supernal image' of Adam, but that all the limbs of the latter were to be found in the body of the former.

³⁴³ *Sha'arei Orah*, 1: 257.

³⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 1: 203–5.

The Tetragrammaton is referred to as the ‘unique name’ because it is exclusive to the Jewish people, signifying their singularity amongst the various ethnic groups that make up the world population.³⁴⁵ Even though the nations stem from and are sustained by the sefirotic pleroma, they have no share in the inner palace (*heikhal penimi*).³⁴⁶ The Tetragrammaton is the exclusive possession of Israel,³⁴⁷ a point linked exegetically to the verse ‘for the portion of the Lord is his people,’ *ki heleq yhw h ammo* (Deut. 32: 9).³⁴⁸ A perfect homology pertains between the divine and mundane realms: ‘Above YHWH is in the middle and the archons surround him, and below Israel is in the middle and all the nations surround him. Why is Israel in the middle? For they are the portion of YHWH and they inherit the land that is the portion of YHWH below, which is Jerusalem.’³⁴⁹ Gikatilla employs a striking parable to convey the qualitative difference between God’s relationship to the Jews on one hand, and to the rest of the nations on the other. In the presence of his servants, the king is adorned in various garments, but when he stands before the members of his household he takes them off, one by one, until he stands naked. Analogously, God is manifest to the other nations through the veils of names and epithets, but when he appears before Israel he removes all of these coverings, and he is manifest through his name YHWH.³⁵⁰ In particular, Gikatilla emphasizes that in the company of the righteous and pious ones of Israel, God is like the king who removes all of his garments and unites with his wife. The spiritual elite of Israel, a clandestine reference to the kabbalists, represents the ideal of being conjoined to the name in the manner of the erotic bond between the beloved and her lover.³⁵¹

³⁴⁵ On the unique relationship between the Tetragrammaton, the attribute of *Tif’eret*, and the Jewish nation, see *Berit Menuḥah*, 29c: ‘All of the potencies of YHWH come to *Tif’eret*, and *Tif’eret* is the place of the effluence that overflows to Israel, and there is no nation in the world nor any archon or ruler that receives from *Tif’eret*. Hence, no person in the world from the nations apart from the seed of the name can make use of this name.’

³⁴⁶ In *Ginnat Egoz*, 343, Gikatilla makes a similar point, although in that context his focus is particularly on the ‘natural philosophers’ of the nations who have no access to the foundation of Torah, which is knowledge of the Tetragrammaton, and thus they can only circle around the inner point from the outside.

³⁴⁷ In *Sha’arei Orah*, 1: 214, Gikatilla remarks that the Gentiles have no portion in the three names of God, Ehyeh, YHWH, and Yah.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 2: 17.

³⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 1: 211.

³⁵⁰ Even though Gikatilla does employ the image of nudity to characterize the relationship of God to Israel, it is plausible to argue that for him as well the Tetragrammaton is itself a garment. If that is the case, then the notion of ‘complete nakedness’ is not an appropriate way of characterizing the encounter with the divine. See Wolfson, ‘Occultation’, 116, n. 8.

³⁵¹ *Sha’arei Orah*, 1: 205–6. On the image of God being garbed in a multiplicity of names, see *ibid.* 196.

To comprehend this one must bear in mind that Gikatilla accepts and elaborates an older esoteric truth regarding the identification of Torah and the name.³⁵² Israel's cleaving to YHWH, therefore, is the contemplative ideal expressing the Jew's special relationship to Torah. The ideal is fully realized in the messianic era when the masculine potency of the divine will be stripped of all names and epithets so that it may be conjoined to the feminine potency. In the moment of redemption, the archons stand on the outside ready to serve God (or, more particularly, the *Shekhinah*, which is called *keneset yisra'el*) just as below the nations will serve Israel.³⁵³ In light of Gikatilla's limiting the Tetragrammaton to the people of Israel, we can better understand the philological intent of his remark that 'every man (*adam*) must strive with all his power to hold on and to cleave to the name YHWH, blessed be he, and the cleaving is by means of Adonai, as it says, 'and to him shall you cleave' (Deut. 10: 20)'.³⁵⁴ The word *adam* cannot be rendered as man in general in this context because Gikatilla states unequivocally that only the Jews have a portion in this name. The only reasonable conclusion is that *adam* denotes the Jewish person.

Gikatilla thus differentiates in an unequivocal way between the lot of Israel and that of the other nations. Simply put, Israel alone is considered to be holy (and thus on the inside of the circle) and the nations profane (and thus they are on the outside). Moreover, Gikatilla does not shy away from offering a metaphysical explanation to account for the innate animosity of Gentiles towards Jews. Thus, he emphasizes that the archons of the seventy nations wait for Israel to sin so that they may be filled with divine blessing. Moreover, the four 'heads' of the seventy archons, which correspond to four shells surrounding the *Shekhinah* in the manner of the foreskin that covers the penis, augment the suffering of the Jews by separating them from God.³⁵⁵ The most acrimonious assault on Israel, however, is attributed by Gikatilla to Samael, the archon of Esau, to whom was allocated the hill country of Seir (Josh. 24: 4),³⁵⁶ the place of the goats (*se'irim*), the lowest of all created beings.³⁵⁷ Samael is the one celestial guardian who is not part of the seventy

³⁵² Ibid. 1: 48–9, 201. Regarding the development of this theme in Gikatilla, see Scholem, *On the Kabbalah*, 42–4; Idel, 'Concept of Torah', 60–2.

³⁵³ *Sha'arei Orah*, 1: 214–16.

³⁵⁴ Ibid. 1: 89. The state of being conjoined to YHWH through Adonai is elsewhere applied to the experience of all the prophets, with the exception of Moses who was conjoined directly to YHWH. See *ibid.* 159–60.

³⁵⁵ Ibid. 1: 211–13. See Gottlieb, *Studies*, 287–8.

³⁵⁶ This is also the explanation of the name *se'eir* applied to Edom in Gen. 36: 20, 36: 21; 1 Chron. 1: 38.

³⁵⁷ The association of the goat and demonic powers is implied in Isa. 13: 21 and 34: 14. It may also lie behind the priestly tradition of casting out one goat as a sin offering to YHWH and the

archons that surround the king. As the archon of Edom he bestows power on the goats (symbolic of the demonic power) and a soul to the planet Mars (associated with evil); he is identified as Satan whose function is to bring charges against Israel in the heavenly court.³⁵⁸ Samael stands outside the circle of the seventy archons, for he is the primordial serpent waiting to ambush and penetrate the holy space.³⁵⁹ According to another passage, the serpent is described as being ‘above on the north side outside the curtain’.³⁶⁰

From Gikatilla’s treatise on the secret of the serpent, we may conclude that the positioning of the primordial serpent outside the curtain (*pargod*), which denotes the barrier separating good and evil, was part of the original intention of creation; indeed, the emplacement of the serpent on the outside was for the sake of the perfection of the world (*tiqqun olam*). However, the sin of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden allowed the impure serpent entry into the sphere of holiness, which resulted in a blurring of boundaries that brought death and transgression to the world.³⁶¹ On occasion Gikatilla lumps together Samael and the incriminating forces from the other nations:

other goat to the wilderness of Azazel (Lev. 16: 6–10). On the connection between Esau the ‘hairy man’ (*ish sa’ir*), goats (*se’irim*), and demons (*shedim*), see Gikatilla’s *Sod Sha’atnez*, in *Heikhal ha-Shem*, 41a. On the demonic implication of the description of Esau as *ish sa’ir*, ‘hairy man’, as opposed to Jacob as *ish halaq*, ‘smooth-skinned’ (Gen. 27: 11), see Joseph of Hamadan, ‘*Sefer Tashak*’, 121–2, and citation of other relevant sources in Wolfson, *Circle*, 211, n. 85.

³⁵⁸ *Sha’arei Orah*, 1: 131–2. On the association of the archon of Egypt and Samael, see *ibid.* 152. See *Secret of the Snake*, 3: ‘Know that Amaleq is the head of the primordial serpent and he is attached to sorcery.’

³⁵⁹ *Sha’arei Orah*, 1: 154. On the primordial serpent, see *ibid.* 2: 127. See also the passage from Gikatilla’s commentary on Ezekiel’s vision of the chariot mentioned above, n. 331. According to that text, the kingdom of the ‘wicked’ Edom is identified as the third of the four shells that surround the *Shekhinah*. A slightly different approach is offered in the anonymous commentary on the *sefirot* that Idel, ‘World of the Angels’, 39–40, has attributed to Gikatilla. According to this text, the seventy archons derive from Abraham and Isaac, respectively the attributes of mercy and judgement (MS Vatican ebr. 456, fol. 16b). Thirty-five archons on the right emerge from Ishmael and thirty-five archons on the left from Esau. The same view is expressed in Gikatilla, *Secret of the Snake*, 1–3. In that context, the thirty-five archons on the right are joined to Abraham through Egypt and the thirty-five archons on the left are joined to Isaac through Amaleq the son of Esau. An attempt to relate both Ishmael and Edom to the left side is found in *Berit Menuḥah*, 27d: ‘All seventy archons whose rule extends over all the heavenly hosts are divided into these two groups, over the one rules the archon of Ishmael, and he is called Egypt, and over the other rules the archon of Edom, and he is called Ashur. This one receives from the strength on the left side of the chariot, and the other as well since there are two sides in strength, one harsh and the other weak, and the harsh one is very harsh and the weak one is weak in accordance with the one that is harsh.’ On the division of the seventy archons into thirty-five on the right side of mercy and thirty-five on the left side of judgement, see Moses of Kiev, *Shoshan Sodoṭ*, 50b. On the exclusion of Ishmael and Esau from the category of the seventy nations, see text cited in Ch. 2, n. 23.

³⁶⁰ *Sha’arei Orah*, 2: 25.

³⁶¹ *Secret of the Snake*, 4–5, 8–9.

Samael, the archon of Edom, stands and constantly accuses Israel and petitions against them so that they lose their merits. All of those who denounce Israel in the land of the nations stand between earth and heaven in the image of a wall and a partition separating Israel and their Father in heaven, and they are called the cloud that separates, concerning which it says 'You have screened yourself off with a cloud so that no prayer may pass through' (Lam. 3: 42).³⁶²

Notwithstanding the existence of prosecuting forces connected to the other nations, which Gikatilla relates more specifically to the four barriers mentioned in Ezekiel 1: 4, the animus is directed primarily toward Edom and its celestial guardian Samael.³⁶³ The seventy nations are eternal, but Samael will be eradicated at the end of days.³⁶⁴ In one passage Gikatilla expresses this matter in terms of God's promise (based on Joel 2: 20) to banish the serpent from the north to a 'parched and desolate land' whence he will no longer have the power to prosecute Israel.³⁶⁵ The inevitable struggle of the holy and impure forces is the mystical significance of the scriptural notion of the perpetual conflict between Israel and Amaleq.³⁶⁶ In the prophecy of Balaam, Amaleq is referred to as the 'first of the nations' (*re'shit goyim*), but 'its end is to perish forever' (*aharito ade oved*) (Num. 24: 20). Gikatilla explicates the biblical text in the following way: "Amaleq is the first of the nations," and thus he entered first to reveal the mysteries of Israel, and he stretched forth his hand upon the last two letters of the name, *waw-he*. Therefore [it says] 'The hand upon the throne of the Lord [*kes yah*], the Lord will be at war with Amaleq through the ages' (Exod. 17: 16).³⁶⁷

It lies beyond the scope of this analysis to discuss in detail the kabbalistic elaboration of the earlier aggadic motif concerning the power of Amaleq over Israel and a concomitant deficiency in the divine name (*yh* in place of *yhwh*) and the throne (*kes* in place of *kisse*).³⁶⁸ The important point to emphasize, however, is that the enduring enmity between Israel and Amaleq, a scion of Esau and hence the earthly embodiment of the demonic impurity of

³⁶² *Sha'arei Orah*, 1: 142.

³⁶³ *Ibid.* 1: 152, where Gikatilla speaks of a special alliance between the archon of Egypt and Samael.

³⁶⁴ *Ibid.* 1: 211–13. On the destruction of Edom in the messianic era, see the apocalyptic fragment preserved in *Zohar* 3: 212b.

³⁶⁵ *Sha'arei Orah*, 2: 25.

³⁶⁶ *Ibid.* 2: 130. On the indestructibility of Israel and the ultimate victory over the prosecutor, see *Ginmat Egoz*, 177–8. The battle between Israel and Amaleq is assigned theosophic significance in *Book Bahir*, §§ 92, p. 177 and 94, p. 181. On the literary background for Israel's enmity towards Amaleq, see the study of Feldman cited above, n. 46.

³⁶⁷ *Sha'arei Orah*, 2: 80. Gikatilla here embellishes an older aggadic motif, which is related exegetically to the expression *kes yah* in Exod. 17: 16: The name of God is incomplete (*yah* in place of YHWH) as long as the throne is incomplete (*kes* in place of *kisse*).

³⁶⁸ For extensive discussion of this theme, see Pedaya, *Name and Sanctuary*, 246–53.

Samael,³⁶⁹ is understood by Gikatilla as an attempt on the part of the satanic force to expose the esoteric wisdom of the name, especially the last two letters, which correspond symbolically to *Tif'eret* and *Malkhut*.³⁷⁰ Given the standard symbolic association of Esau and Christianity in the medieval rabbinic imagination, one may surmise that Gikatilla is cryptically alluding to a point I discerned in a passage from zoharic literature. The mystery of faith in the holy realm, the union of male and female, has its spiritual analogue in the demonic realm in the worship of Jesus and Mary. Christian devotional piety is understood as a theological blemish that impinges upon the last two letters of the Tetragrammaton, a defect that is mended through *yod* and *he*, the first two letters, which are the source of salvation (*yeshu'ah*) exclusive to the Jewish nation. Even if one were not inclined to accept my interpretation, it is clear that, according to Gikatilla, redemption is connected to the Tetragrammaton, the mystical essence of Torah, and hence it is peculiar to the people of Israel. "There is no salvation (*teshu'ah*) except through the name YHWH, blessed be he, and this is (the import of the verse) "But Israel has been saved (*nosha*) through YHWH, an everlasting salvation (*teshu'at olamim*) (Isa. 45: 17)"³⁷¹ Redemption is the distinctive boon for Jews since its source in the sefirotic world is the attribute of *Binah*, the world-to-come, a place to which no other nation can reach. "He will set you high above all the nations that he has made" (Deut. 26: 19), height (*elyon*) and depth (*tehom*) are unique to Israel . . . and this is the secret of the world-to-come, the wine that is preserved in its grapes,³⁷² for within it there is no aspect of the libation wine, for no archon of the nations ascends to there and it is not consecrated to idolatry.³⁷³ The theistic overcoming of idolatry attested in the history of the ancient Israelite cult is recast theosophically as the eschatological supremacy of Jews as the souls that shall uniquely return to the height and depth whence they emerged, the world-to-come, the womb of *Binah*, the wine preserved in the grapes that

³⁶⁹ On the symbolic nexus between Samael, Edom, and Amaleq, see Scholem, *Origins*, 297–8; Vajda, 'Passages anti-chrétiens', 52–3, n. 30.

³⁷⁰ An entirely different approach to the power of Edom over Israel is implicit in Gikatilla's interpretation of 'Isaac favoured Esau because the venison was in his mouth' (Gen. 25: 28) in *Sha'arei Orah*, 1: 227–8. According to Gikatilla, we cannot understand this verse as affirming that the righteous Isaac could have loved the wicked Esau. The mystical intent rather is that Isaac foresaw the time when the suffering of the Jewish people under the dominion of Esau would purify their transgressions (based on the view regarding exile expressed in the Babylonian Talmud, *Berakhot* 56a). The wickedness of Edom, therefore, is a vehicle of divine judgement.

³⁷¹ *Sha'arei Orah*, 1: 210.

³⁷² See above, n. 224.

³⁷³ *Secret of the Snake*, 1. The ascendancy of *Binah* above the seventy nations is connected in *Sha'arei Orah*, 2: 59, with the name *rehovot ha-nahar*, literally, the 'expansions of the river'. Interestingly, in the biblical context (Gen. 36: 37; 1 Chron. 1: 48) this term refers to a place within the land of Edom.

cannot be used as libation consecrated to idolatry. I suggest that idolatry here should be decoded as an allusion to Christianity, the power of Samael and Lilith in the world. In Gikatilla's text one may discover a pointed response to stock polemical charges brought against the Jews centred on the status of their messianic belief.

RAMIFICATIONS OF ZOHARIC ANTHROPOLOGY

The anthropological position of *Zohar*, which predominantly restricts the application of the term *adam* to the Jewish soul, is regurgitated frequently in subsequent kabbalistic works as well as other homiletical or expository compositions influenced by the symbolism crafted in the crucible of medieval Jewish esotericism.³⁷⁴ To illustrate the enduring impact of the ethnocentric orientation, I will provide examples from several key figures from later centuries, focusing particularly on authors considered to be exponents of kabbalistic ethics. The list of examples that I will induce is highly selective, but it should be clear to the reader that I could have added numerous other references. As I remarked in the Introduction, it is incorrect to present the kabbalistic approach as monolithic. Diversity of opinion is to be celebrated by the scholar enmeshed in the variegated paths of this tradition. Notwithstanding this cautionary remark, the textual evidence suggests that with respect to the matter at hand uniformity of conviction rather than heterogeneity is the rule of thumb.

The first kabbalist I will cite is Meir Ibn Gabbai, who was born in Spain in 1480 and sojourned in Turkey for the better part of his adult life in the first half of the sixteenth century.³⁷⁵

³⁷⁴ An interesting example of this phenomenon is found in Menasseh ben Israel, *Nishmat Hayyim*, II. 7, 38b–c. It must be pointed out, however, that the author is not always consistent as there are passages wherein he articulates a more universalistic approach to the nature of humanity, an approach that is well reflected in his utilization of non-Jewish, even Christian and Islamic, sources. The impact of the zoharic conception of human nature in *Nishmat Hayyim* is duly noted by Dan, 'Menasseh ben Israel's *Nishmat Hayyim*', 67–8. In spite of this influence, Dan is of the opinion that it is incorrect to consider the author a kabbalist, a position he defends on the basis of the fact that his concept of evil is substantially different from the dominant kabbalistic approaches. For a different view, see Idel, 'Kabbalah, Platonism and Prisca Theologia'. On Menasseh ben Israel's conception of humanity, see also Yosha, 'Between Theology and Anthropology', 279–80. A similar utilization of the kabbalistic distinction between the status of the soul of the Jew and the soul of the Gentile is utilized by Samuel Levi Morteira, another leading figure of the Amsterdam community at the time of Menasseh ben Israel. See Saperstein, *Exile in Amsterdam*, 295.

³⁷⁵ For two useful biographical accounts of Meir Ibn Gabbai, see Goetschel, *Meir Ibn Gabbai*, 33–54; *Sod ha-Shabbat*, 1–10.

Before *Hokhmah* emanated from the ether that is not comprehended (*awir she-eino nitpas*) everything was concealed in nothingness, in the hiddenness of his glory (*hevyon uzzo*),³⁷⁶ the supernal mystery (*seter elyon*),³⁷⁷ until the primordial ether (*awir qadmon*) was broken through by the force of Ein Sof, and *Hokhmah*, which is the *yod* in the *awir*, emanated . . . and in it were the *sefirot* and the souls that in the future would inhabit the bodies of created beings. Everything was mixed up like the wine mixed in its dregs and the silver in its dross until each one acquired the place appropriate to it, the wine was purified and separated from its dregs and they were discharged to the outside, and in a like manner the silver was purified and removed from the dross.³⁷⁸ Similarly, in *Hokhmah* were all things, those that are the holy of holies and those that are profane, and from there everything emanated and acquired its proper place, the holy in its place and the profane in its place. The holy is the portion of Israel, and thus they are called 'holy,' 'Israel was holy to the Lord, the first fruits of his harvest' (Jer. 2: 3), the laudable of the harvest that was in the supernal wisdom, which is the beginning of the ways of God, and the chaff and the straw, which is the profane, the portion of the nations. . . . Since all this requires great wisdom (*hokhmah gedolah*) it has been received from a sagacious kabbalist (*mequbbelet me-ish hakham mequbbal*) who said regarding this, 'Ask your father, he will inform you etc. When the Most High gave nations their homes' (Deut. 32: 7–8). . . . the archons, which are the refuse and dregs . . . and from there all the nations emanated . . . Israel are the holy and pure part, and everything is parallel.³⁷⁹ 'And set the divisions of man' (Deut. 32: 8), for they come from the place of division (*maqom ha-perud*) and thus they were separated, but Israel are from the place of unity (*maqom ha-yihud*), and thus they were unified to be a treasured people (*am segullah*).³⁸⁰ Each one follows its source above.³⁸¹

This passage is exemplary of the tension between monistic and dualistic ontologies that has informed kabbalists through the ages. In Chapter 3 I will pursue the matter in detail, citing, *inter alia*, another passage from this very composition. At this juncture it is sufficient to note that, according to the view articulated by Ibn Gabbai, which is based on the older symbolism that evolved in thirteenth-century Provençal and Spanish kabbalah, in the primal state all things were mixed together and hence holy and profane were not yet clearly demarcated as polar opposites. With this statement Ibn Gabbai has brought closer to the surface the dimension of the traditional kabbalistic

³⁷⁶ Based on Hab. 3: 4.

³⁷⁷ Ps. 91: 1.

³⁷⁸ Prov. 25: 4.

³⁷⁹ Literally, one thing corresponding to another, *zeh keneged zeh*.

³⁸⁰ Deut. 7: 6, 14: 2. The deuteronomistic phrase should be compared to the priestly locution in Exod. 19: 5. Although this chapter is a composite of JE sources, there are clear signs (such as vv. 5–6) that it passed through the editorial hands of a priestly group. My unlearned surmise was confirmed by the more technical exposition in Knohl, *Sanctuary of Silence*, 17, n. 24.

³⁸¹ Ibn Gabbai, *Avodat ha-Qodesh*, pt. 1, ch. 20, p. 46.

orientation that I call 'hypernomian transmorality', that is, extending beyond the limit of the law to fulfil the law, setting foot on the path to venture beyond the path. Of this too I will have more to say in Chapter 3. What is necessary to emphasize here is that in the subsequent stage of the emanative process, when all things emerged out of divine wisdom, a process of clarification and division ensued as the holy and profane portions were set apart, the former assigned exclusively to Israel and the latter to the nations of the world.

Ibn Gabbai goes so far as to say that the intention (*kawwanah*) of creation was that the nations would be subjugated to Israel since purity should prevail over impurity.³⁸² Indeed, in the ideal sense Israel is the true humanity. Thus, responding to the lament of the philosophers regarding the lowly status of the human being vis-à-vis celestial and divine matters, Ibn Gabbai quips: 'If God has distanced man (*ha-adam*) from what is above him, Israel are called *adam* in truth for they grasp the Torah, and they are closer to God, and greater in stature and importance in relation to him than are the angels.'³⁸³ For the kabbalist, the human being, identified more precisely as Israel, is on a higher ontic status than the angels, a view affirmed, as I have noted, in quite a few significant and influential rabbinic dicta regarding the superiority of the communal worship of the Jewish people over the celestial hymning of the angels before the throne of glory.³⁸⁴ Ibn Gabbai illustrates the enduring impact of the idea expressed in older kabbalistic sources with respect to the ontological supremacy of demarcating Jews as the true Adam, the part of the human species that most accurately mirrors the imaginal form of the divine anthropos, also identified as YHWH, the mystical core of Torah.

As a second example of the enduring impact of this anthropological presumption I cite from the sixteenth-century Safedian kabbalist Moses Cordovero, in the following passage from his massive commentary on *Zohar*:

The secret of the creation of man (*adam*) is not in the preparation of the physical limbs and the tops of his bones, for there are several nations (*goyim*) in the world and they are aligned in their limbs (*meyusharim ba-eivareihem*), but they allude to several accusers and adversaries. Indeed, the essence of man (*iqqar ha-adam*) is the aligned supernal form (*ha-šurah ha-elyonah ha-meyusheret*), which alludes in the case of holy Israel to their spirituality that is hidden. Indeed, when this form was contrived, the King of all kings became wise and he created it in accord with the supernal attributes and their principles. This occurred so that he would draw forth to there the holy soul, which emanates verily from the emanation (*ašulah me-ha-ašlut mammash*), and he would be garbed in that form. Hence, the form will be comparable to that which is garbed within it and suitable to its matter.³⁸⁵

³⁸² Ibid., pt. 3, ch. 1, p. 202.

³⁸³ Ibid. 206. ³⁸⁴ See above, n. 93.

³⁸⁵ Cordovero, *Zohar im Perush Or Yaqar*, 17: 130.

The mystery of being human cannot relate essentially to the composition of bodily limbs, for from a strictly anatomical perspective (leaving aside the matter of socio-cultural patterns that invariably impact the texture of human embodiment) there is no difference between Jew and non-Jew. The nations may possess bodies that are aligned, straight, and well balanced, but symbolically they embody evil angelic forces, the accusers and adversaries. To what, then, does the essence of the human relate? To the supernal form that belongs uniquely to the holy soul of Israel, which emanates from the realm of divine emanations.³⁸⁶ It should come as no surprise, therefore, that Cordovero maintained that kabbalistic gnosis should be limited exclusively to Jews.³⁸⁷ As he expressed the matter in the opening section of *Pardes Rimmonim*, the *sefirot* are described in *Sefer Yeşirah* by the adjective *belimah*, which is decoded as *beli mah* or *beli mahut*, that is, ‘without substance’, for ‘they have no essence that can be comprehended by human beings since they are not bounded and they are not comprehended as they are lacking boundary and corporeality, and that which is not a body cannot be comprehended except in the heart of the enlightened ones of the people of Israel by way of prophetic-like vision (*derekh re’ut kemo bi-nevu’ah*)’.³⁸⁸ Envisioning the sefirotic anthropos is the exclusive prerogative of the Jews, who alone can be considered ‘human’ in the fullest and most exact sense.

In *Tomer Devorah*, a short but influential treatise that promotes the synthesis of theosophical doctrine and ethical pietism based on the correlation of moral virtues and the *sefirot*,³⁸⁹ Cordovero applies this understanding of *adam* to the priestly injunction to love one’s neighbour.³⁹⁰ It is incumbent on every Jew to love his fellow Jew since the Jews collectively constitute the corporate entity (designated *adam*) that is the earthly incarnation of the imaginal body of God.³⁹¹ Just as in the supernal form each *sefirah* contains

³⁸⁶ In *Or Ne’erav*, 3: 5, p. 29, Cordovero writes that initially Israel and the nations were equal but God chose Israel and thereby accorded them special status as the people to whom he is conjoined in love. It appears that something of the universal dimension is reaffirmed in the messianic vision offered by Cordovero, *Pardes Rimmonim*, 2: 6, 9*d*.

³⁸⁷ The antipathy on the part of Cordovero to the transmission of the secrets of Torah to Gentiles is evident in his harsh reaction to the emergence of Christian kabbalah in Italy. See Sack, *Kabbalah*, 37, n. 22; Idel, ‘Jewish Thinkers’, 55–6.

³⁸⁸ *Pardes Rimmonim*, 1: 1, 2*a*.

³⁸⁹ Dan, *Jewish Mysticism and Jewish Ethics*, 84–7; Cordovero, *Le Palmier de Déborah*, 25–9.

³⁹⁰ *Tomer Devorah*, ch. 1, pp. 18–19.

³⁹¹ See e.g. *Pardes Rimmonim*, 4: 8, 21*d*, where the emanations are described as taking on the ‘human form figuratively’ (*šiyur adam be-mashal*). Cordovero, as many kabbalists before and after him, could not accept a literal ascription of corporeality to the realm of divine potencies. As he makes clear in *ibid.* 2: 1, 6*d*, ‘it is not the case that there is actually (*mammashi*) a body above, and it is not right [to assign] corporeal characteristics to the *sefirot*, but since the body is created from them and they are the source in relation to it, the reality of the corporeal characteristics is found in the sources by way of an epithet (*al derekh ha-kinnuy*)’. In contrast

the others and thus reflects the entire pleroma from its own perspective, so below the people of Israel are an organic body wherein all the limbs are connected and each one uniquely expresses the unity of the whole.

The third citation is from the sixteenth-century work *Re'shit Hokhmah*, by Elijah de Vidas, disciple of Cordovero:

After a person (*adam*) knows that his matter is not like the rest of the creatures from the seventy nations, for even if they strengthen the good inclination over the bad inclination or vice-versa, their matter neither adds nor detracts, until they will receive all of the Torah. But Israel are called 'sons of God' (*banim le-maqom*), and they are called human (*adam*), as it says, 'for you are men' (*adam attem*) (Ezek. 34: 31), and they are created in the supernal image, as it says, 'He made Adam in the image of God' (Gen. 9: 6). All that they do is activated in the supernal roots from the side of the soul that is in them, and the good inclination and the evil inclination overflows upon them from above.³⁹²

The human figure distinguished amongst the seventy nations of the world is none other than the people of Israel who alone are referred to as 'sons of God' created in the divine image.³⁹³ When the rest of the nations receive the Torah (presumably in the messianic era) they will attain the status of Israel, but until such time the difference between Israel and the nations is determinative. The universalistic language notwithstanding, the position adopted by de Vidas is ethnocentric to the core, an ethnocentrism that is deeply rooted in the ontological scheme adopted by many kabbalists: Israel alone embodies the

to the essence of Ein Sof, which is entirely beyond visual form and verbal representation, it is permissible to attribute figure (*temunah*) and image (*dimyon*) to the light of Ein Sof that is garbed in the garments of the sefirotic gradations (4: 6, 19*b*; 4: 8, 21*d*), but even in that case the attributions are not to be taken literally, for the 'sefirot are naught but the holy spirit (*ruah ha-qodesh*), spiritual thoughts (*mahshavot ruhaniyyot*), united one with the other in a true unity (*meyuhadot zo le-zo yihud amitti*), and everything is united in Ein Sof' (6: 2, 28*b*). In the final analysis, the garbing of Ein Sof in the *sefirot* embraces the paradoxical confluence of opposites, for with respect to the manifestation of that which has no form it must be said that 'the cause of disclosure is the cause of concealment, and the cause of concealment the cause of disclosure (*sibbat ha-hitggallut hu sibbat ha-he'lem we-sibbat ha-he'lem hu sibbat ha-hitggallut*), that is, by the concealment of the great light and its being garbed it is revealed. Hence, the light is hidden, but, in truth, it is revealed, for if it were not concealed it would not be revealed' (5: 4, 25*d*). On the unity of the *sefirot* in the divine essence, see 5: 4, 25*a*. On the removal of Ein Sof from all spatial or corporeal images, see 4: 6, 20*a*; 4: 8, 21*d*; Ben-Shlomo, *Mystical Theology*, 158–62.

³⁹² De Vidas, *Re'shit Hokhmah*, Sha'ar ha-Yir'ah, ch. 4, 1: 92.

³⁹³ Cf. *Re'shit Hokhmah*, Sha'ar ha-Ahavah, ch. 6, 1: 460: 'From this passage [*Zohar* 2: 55*b*] it is explained how extensive is the love of the holy One, blessed be he, for humanity (*adam*), especially Israel, until the point that he, may he be blessed, is called the brother and friend of each and every one.' Prima facie, it would appear that Israel and humanity are distinguished, but when one examines the text carefully it becomes evident that de Vidas equates the two. Israel is the ideal Adam and hence any statements made about God's general relationship to humanity apply to God's particular relationship to Israel.

true human ideal. Consider, for example, the recasting of the rabbinic trope that the world was created for the sake of Israel³⁹⁴ on the part of de Vidas: ‘It is known that the essence of the world is Israel, for on their behalf the world was created, as they have interpreted, “In the beginning (*bere’shit*) God created” (Gen. 1: 1), for the sake of Israel who are called the “first” (*re’shit*).³⁹⁵ Israel is the essence of the existence of the world (*iqqar qiyyum olam*), for the world is not possible without Israel.’³⁹⁶

The full implications of the kabbalistic anthropology are underscored in another passage wherein de Vidas repeats this theme almost verbatim.³⁹⁷ In that context, however, the claim that the world is created for the sake of Israel is followed by the assertion that God found it necessary to create souls (*neshamot*) with good and evil inclinations. In support of this idea, de Vidas cites a zoharic text that relates to the creation of *adam*.³⁹⁸ As much as one might be tempted to render the latter as a reference to humanity at large, the context necessitates the more sobering realization that the human being described refers exclusively to Israel. In yet another passage from *Re’shit Hokhmah* wherein this motif is reiterated, the special ontological status of the souls of Israel is expressed in terms of the image of being conjoined to the Tetragrammaton, which constitutes the unique holiness of the Jewish people; indeed, the exilic condition of Israel is presented as a rupture in the nature of God, which is manifest as a separation of the letters of the name.³⁹⁹

The ethnocentric portrayal of Judaism is unabashedly affirmed in a rather striking way in the following comment by Ḥayyim Viṭal, one of the most important sixteenth-century kabbalists, disciple of both Cordovero and Luria:

This is the meaning of ‘happy is the man’ (Ps. 32: 2), the one that is called man (*adam*), as it says, ‘for you are men’ (Ezek. 34: 31), for in Israel there are those who are like sheep, concerning whom it is written ‘for you my flock’ (ibid.), and there are those who are more important who are called ‘men’. When the holy One, blessed be he, created the first Adam, all the souls were included within him, and there were only souls of Israel, and had he not sinned, the nations would not have come into the world. After he sinned the sparks of the nations of the world were mixed up with him, and this is the meaning of ‘for you are men’, the souls of Israel alone were contained in the first Adam.⁴⁰⁰

³⁹⁴ See n. 244 above.

³⁹⁵ *Midrash Tanḥuma*, ed. Buber, *Bere’shit*, 10, 3*b*.

³⁹⁶ *Re’shit Hokhmah*, *Haqdamah*, 1: 4.

³⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, *Sha’ar ha-Teshuvah*, ch. 1, 1: 668.

³⁹⁸ *Zohar* 1: 23*a*.

³⁹⁹ *Re’shit Hokhmah*, *Sha’ar ha-Qedushshah*, ch. 1, 2: 9.

⁴⁰⁰ Viṭal, *Liqquṭei Torah Nevi’im Ketuvim*, 333 (ad Ps. 32: 1). Cf. Eysbeschuetz, *Ya’arot Devash*,

Needless to say, reflected in this statement is the much older exegetical identification of primal Adam as Israel, but Viṭal adds a rather startling element: non-Jewish nations come into being as a consequence of Adam's transgression. In the ideal state of purity and innocence, the human form is homologized as a Jew; the existence of all other human beings is due to sin and imperfection. In a passage from another treatise, Viṭal elaborates the point in an effort to account for the exile of the Jews amongst the nations of the world.

'A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph. And he said to his people, "Look the Israelite people are more numerous and stronger than we are"' (Exod. 1: 8–9). In this place, we must explicate the matter of the exile of Egypt, and through it many verses strewn about will be elucidated. We have already explained in the section *Re'eh* with respect to the commandment to remember the exodus from Egypt (Deut. 16: 4) matters pertaining to the reason for the exile of Israel amongst the nations,⁴⁰¹ and we said that primal Adam comprised all the souls and all the worlds, but when he sinned all these souls fell from him into the shells that were divided into seventy nations. Israel had to be exiled there in each and every nation to gather the sprouts of the holy souls that are scattered amidst these thorns. As the sages, blessed be their memory, said⁴⁰² . . . 'Why was Israel exiled amongst the nations? In order to add converts to them etc.' Understand this well.⁴⁰³

According to the perspective enunciated by Viṭal, based on the zoharic precedent,⁴⁰⁴ the mystical drama of conversion entails liberation of Jewish souls from their entrapment in the body of Gentiles, a process that can be explained as well in terms of the soteriological task of the Jew to redeem the sparks of the primal Adam scattered in the demonic force of the seventy nations. Viṭal depicts the spiritual significance of the exile of *Shekhinah* in these very terms: as a consequence of the transgression of primal Adam, good and evil were mixed together, and all the souls of holiness fell into the seventy demonic shells, which correspond to the seventy nations. By means of prayer, observing the ritual laws, and studying Torah, the congregation of Israel assists *Shekhinah* in carrying out the task of gathering the soul sparks; when the ingathering of all the fallen sparks is complete—marked by the liberation

⁴⁰¹ Viṭal, *Sha'ar ha-Miṣwot*, 63a–64b.

⁴⁰² The reference given in the text is *Midrash Rabbah*, but the passage is found in Babylonian Talmud, Pesahim 87b.

⁴⁰³ Viṭal, *Sha'ar ha-Pesuqim*, 55b–c.

⁴⁰⁴ Viṭal refers explicitly (*Sha'ar ha-Pesuqim*, 56a) to *Zohar* 2: 189b, where the enslavement of the Israelites in Egypt is depicted in alchemical terms as the purification of the nation in the crucible of impurity, a homiletical motif linked exegetically to the verse 'a lily amongst the thorns' (Song 2: 2). The 'thorns' represent the seventy nations of the world, which correspond to the seventy members of Jacob's clan that went down to Egypt (Gen. 46: 27). On conversion in zoharic symbolism, see Wijnhoven, 'Zohar and the Proselyte'; Wolfson, 'Occultation', 127–35.

of the sparks that are lodged in the feet, the mystical significance of the rabbinic idiom *iqvot mashiah*, the ‘heels of the messiah’⁴⁰⁵—then the time of the messianic redemption has arrived.⁴⁰⁶ The sin of Adam resulted in a fracturing of the psychic unity, which is depicted as the containment of all souls in his own, an idea that Viṭal in one context transmits as a tradition he heard proclaimed by Luria.⁴⁰⁷ The mending of the split into seventy aspects demands restoring the sparks of the seventy nations to their source and thereby overcoming the differentiation, reconstituting the original indiscriminate oneness in the soul of Adam. The eschatological drama of liberating the sparks, therefore, is interpreted as a gradual process of conversion whereby the alterity of the other is transcended. What is crucial for the theme of this chapter is the fact that the souls contained within Adam must be considered ontically ‘Jewish’ and thus in the most pristine sense the ideal human is Israel.

The next source that I shall cite to illustrate the repercussions of zoharic anthropology is the seventeenth-century work *Shenei Luḥot ha-Berit*, by Isaiah Horowitz, a composition that is often described as exemplary of kabbalistic ethics:

It is written, ‘Love the Lord your God’ (Deut. 6: 5), and it is written, ‘Love your neighbour as yourself’ (Lev. 19: 18). The two loves are bound together and they are united by his unity, blessed be he. Thus we conclude [the blessings of the proclamation of divine unity] ‘he who chooses his people Israel in love’ or ‘he who loves his people Israel,’ then we say the verse [that proclaims] the unity [of God], and afterward [we recite the verse concerning] the love of God, blessed be he, ‘Love the Lord your God.’ . . . In truth, if you examine the matter carefully, you will find that most of the commandments are dependent on the love of one’s friend as oneself . . . If he loves his friend as himself, how much more so should he love the holy One, blessed be he, who performs [acts of] unqualified love with him, true love, and he is the Lord of the universe and in his hand is everything, blessed be he. Thus ‘Love your neighbour as yourself’ is the foot upon which the world stands. ‘Love your neighbour as yourself’ is that which brings about ‘Love the Lord your God.’⁴⁰⁸

In the continuation of this passage, Horowitz cites the view of Abraham Segal that love of humanity and love of God are the two pillars of Torah and thus they must be comparable to one another.⁴⁰⁹ There is no way to cleave to God except through love of one’s fellow man: ‘“Love the Lord your God” corresponds to “Love your neighbour as yourself”, for he who fulfills the one fulfills

⁴⁰⁵ See Wolfson, ‘Walking’, 193–7, repr. in id., *Along the Path*, 99–101.

⁴⁰⁶ *Sha’ar ha-Miṣwot*, 63a.

⁴⁰⁷ *Sha’ar ha-Gilgulim*, 65b.

⁴⁰⁸ Horowitz, *Shenei Luḥot ha-Berit ha-Shalem*, 1: 223–4.

⁴⁰⁹ *Ibid.* 1: 224.

the other, and when the love and the conjunction with God are upon him, then he is called by his name, for the name of the holy One, blessed be he, is peace.⁴¹⁰ Following the orientation attributed to Hillel in rabbinic sources, Horowitz maintains that the love of human beings (*ahavat ha-beriyot*) is the commandment upon which the Torah in its entirety stands.⁴¹¹ Indeed, love of one's neighbour is the very foundation of the world (*tiqqun olam we-yishshuvo*).⁴¹² Here, again, one might be tempted to interpret the opinion of Horowitz as confirmation of a universalistic ethos that affirms the love of all human beings as a prerequisite for the love of God.⁴¹³ However, when one examines the relevant texts carefully, the true meaning of the author's intent becomes apparent: the injunction to love's one's neighbour applies to one's fellow Jew (as we saw above in the case of Cordovero), and all the acts of kindness enumerated by Horowitz relate specifically to how one Jew should behave in relation to another Jew within the community.⁴¹⁴ This interpretation is far more consistent with the well-established kabbalistic principle declared repetitively by Horowitz: the divine image in whose pattern Adam is created is identified as the realm of *sefirot* configured in the imagination of the visionary as an anthropos, also identified as the four letters of the name YHWH, the mystical essence of Torah, which is incarnated most perfectly in the body politic of Israel.⁴¹⁵ This is the import of the kabbalistic theme that God, Torah, and Israel are joined together as one.⁴¹⁶ The souls of Israel, therefore,

⁴¹⁰ Ibid. 1: 227.

⁴¹¹ Ibid. 1: 261.

⁴¹² *Shenei Luhot ha-Berit*, 2: 61b.

⁴¹³ Such is the position taken by Jacobs; see Introduction, n. 15.

⁴¹⁴ This is not to say that Horowitz does not advocate at all a sense of ethical responsibility to non-Jews. On the contrary, he does affirm the necessity of establishing peaceful relations with others based on the promotion of the 'ways of peace' (*darkhei shalom*) in the world. See *Shenei Luhot ha-Berit ha-Shalem*, 1: 227. My claim is, however, that the specific nexus he draws between love of God and love of a fellow human being, which serves as a basis for his mystical piety, is more restricted to the love of the Jewish people. The parochial interpretation of the commandment 'Love your neighbour as yourself' (Lev. 19: 18) as a reference exclusively to a fellow Israelite on the part of the kabbalists is rooted in a long-standing ethnocentric attitude cultivated in Jewish sources from its biblical roots. See Simon, 'The Neighbor'. For a more universalistic approach, which is certainly laudable but textually questionable, see Spero, *Morality*, 131–3. See also Goodman, *On Justice*, 6–8, 34; and discussion in Novak, *Covenantal Rights*, 147–52.

⁴¹⁵ That this very principle is the foundation of the worldview embraced by Horowitz is clear from the lengthy introduction to the work called *Toldot Adam*, the 'generations of man,' derived from Gen. 5: 1. For discussion and translation of this text, see Horowitz, *Generations of Adam*.

⁴¹⁶ *Shenei Luhot ha-Berit ha-Shalem*, 2: 205.

are far above the gradation of the angels, for the souls of Israel are hewn from the throne of glory, and they have a root from the throne of glory and above in the secret of the emanation (*ha-ašilot*), and they are the 'portion of the Lord, his people' (Deut. 32: 9), but the gradation of the angels is in [the world] of formation (*yeširah*), and they have no sustenance except from the throne and below. The souls of Israel are the spirituality (*ruhaniyyut*) of Torah.⁴¹⁷

Horowitz gives away the true intent of his remarks concerning the convergence of the love of God and the love of humanity when he notes that the

love of one's neighbour is joined to the love of the holy One, blessed be he, for the greatness of the obligation of the love of one's neighbour is for the sake of the glory of the love of holy One, blessed be he, that is, so that he should remember that he is created in the supernal image and likeness, and the portion of the soul that is within him is a 'portion of God from above' (Job 31: 2). Therefore we are called the community of Israel (*keneset yisra'el*), for all of us enter (*mekhunasi*) and are unified in the secret of his unity, blessed be he.⁴¹⁸

Restating this theme, he writes: 'The secret of the matter is . . . that we are the community of Israel, for we are unified in the secret of the true unity, and when there is an argument, God forbid, there is division and separation above, and the cutting of the shoots.'⁴¹⁹ From these passages, and others that could have been cited, it is abundantly clear that the unifying force of the love of humanity applies most precisely to the community of Israel, for this community alone represents the ideal anthropos, which reflects the theosophic nature of God refracted in the Torah. The price to be paid for the conception of the Jewish people as the unique incarnation of the divine image in the corporeal world is the ontological division separating Jews and other ethno-religious groups, a division that in some contexts leads to a demonization of the other.

To appreciate the extent and depth of the influence of the kabbalistic orientation upon later authors, it is worth considering the approach to the question of the human status of the nations vis-à-vis Israel in the work of the towering rabbinic figure of the sixteenth century, Judah Loewe of Prague, better known as Maharal, for in his writings we sense a genuine engagement and struggle with the kabbalistic presumption regarding the distinctive nature of the Jewish soul. I begin with a comment wherein Maharal attempts to explain two rabbinic dicta that seem to be contradictory, the statement attributed to Aqiva, 'The human being (*adam*) is cherished for he is created in the image',⁴²⁰ and the assertion attributed to Simeon ben Yoḥai, 'You are called *adam*, but the idolatrous nations are not called *adam*'.⁴²¹ Prima facie, it

⁴¹⁷ *Shenei Luhot ha-Berit ha-Shalem*, 2: 298.

⁴¹⁸ *Ibid.* 1: 224.

⁴¹⁹ *Ibid.* 1: 227.

⁴²⁰ Mishnah, Avot 3: 14.

⁴²¹ For references, see above, n. 107.

would seem that in the former remark the term *adam* applies universally to all human beings, whereas in the latter the term is limited to the Jewish people. Commenting on this exegetical dilemma, Maharal writes:

Even though it says, ‘The human being (*adam*) is cherished,’ this does not include every species of humanity, as the sages, blessed be their memory, already said, ‘for you are called *adam*, but the nations are not called *adam*’. It is as if they said the perfection of creation, which relates to the human in particular, applies to Israel and not to the nations, for, as we have explained many times, Israel in particular are called *adam*. Yet, since this level is not only for Israel, he said regarding this that the ‘human is cherished’... even though this level belongs exclusively to Israel and not to the nations, even so the nations also have something of the name *adam*, for they are called *adam* on account of the divine image (*ha-šelem ha-elohi*), as it is written, ‘Let us make man (*adam*) in our image’ (Gen. 1: 26). However, with respect to the nations, the human form (*šurat adam*) is abolished on account of the body, for the divine image of a man is abolished from the perspective of the corporeal body, as if everything were physical and there were no divine image. Nevertheless, this image is found in the other nations, although it is abolished and it is not considered as anything. Therefore, he said ‘The human is cherished’, and he did not say ‘Israel are cherished for they are created in the image of God’, for to some degree the nations possess this image with which the human was created. Moreover, when the human being was created, this level belonged to Adam and Noah even though they were not called by the name ‘Israel’. Notwithstanding the fact that after God, blessed be he, chose Israel, the image was diminished amongst the nations, the divine image still belongs to the human being insofar as he is a human being, and this matter is clear.⁴²²

In contrast to many other kabbalists, Maharal offers a relatively attenuated position, for he does not deny categorically that non-Jews are created in the image of God.⁴²³ On the contrary, he emphatically insists that all humans share the divine image since Scripture proclaims that Adam in general, and not Israel in particular, was created in the image of God.⁴²⁴ Notwithstanding the affirmation of an ostensibly more universalistic understanding of the divine image, Maharal still maintains an unbridgeable ontological chasm separating Jew and non-Jew. Thus, commenting on the rabbinic statement that only Israel is referred to as *adam*, he writes: ‘Certainly the nations are also

⁴²² Judah Loewe of Prague, *Nešah Yisra’el*, ch. 11, pp. 304–5. An almost verbatim parallel to this passage appears in Judah Loewe of Prague, *Derekh Ḥayyim*, 354–5.

⁴²³ There are, however, exceptions wherein the divine image is assigned exclusively to the Jewish people. See e.g. Judah Loewe of Prague, *Ner Mišwah*, 10–11. On the status of the Jew and non-Jew in Judah’s religious philosophy, see Gross, *Eternity of Israel*, 49–79; Sherwin, *Mystical Theology*, 83–93; Neher, *Le Puits de l’exil*, 59–64; Golding, ‘Maharal’s Conception’; Fox, ‘Moral Philosophy’. Fox discusses Judah’s moral philosophy of humanity without ever specifically clarifying the distinction he draws between Jews and non-Jews.

⁴²⁴ See Judah Loewe of Prague, *Be’er ha-Golah*, 121: ‘This image comprises all people, Israel and the nations, everyone who walks upright has the divine image.’

called *adam*, as in the expression “sons of man” (*benei adam*). However, Israel is the complete human (*adam gamur*) to the exclusion of the nations who are not a complete human.⁴²⁵ The Jew is the ‘complete human,’ for only he truly possess the divine image. The distinction is clarified in a comment of Maharal from another composition:

As the sages said, ‘The human being (*adam*) is cherished for he is created in the image of God,’ and as we have elaborated in our book, *Derkeh Hayyim*,⁴²⁶ with respect to the matter of the level implied in [the statement] ‘The human is cherished.’ All people do not have this level equally, for even though the entire human species is created in the image of God, they said,⁴²⁷ ‘You are called *adam*, but the idolatrous nations are not called *adam*’, for there should not be a nullification of the divine form that was given to Adam, and the idolatrous nations are more physical, and this form is nullified by corporeality, for the form becomes material. However, in the case of Israel, corporeality is nullified in relation to the form, and when the corporeality is nullified in relation to the form, this is [the condition of] *adam*.⁴²⁸

Maharal exerts a great effort to preserve the kabbalistic ethnocentrism even as he attempts to embrace a more universalistic approach to the nature of the human being qua human being. All human beings are created in the image of God, which is related to the intellect, but Israel alone possesses the essence of this image, as they alone received the Torah, a gift that bestows on them the capability of transcending the limits of corporeality by attaining a state of pure spirituality.⁴²⁹ Maharal utilizes this notion to explain the rabbinic claim that no other nation was prepared to accept the Torah that God offered prior to bestowing it upon Israel:

The commandments of the Torah, which are divine actions (*pe‘ulot ha-elohiyot*), are assigned to Israel, for in accordance with the level of their souls they are prepared for the divine actions, and they are unique to them. However, on account of their deficiencies and insufficiencies, the idolatrous nations are not worthy for the divine actions, which are the commandments, and this is [the import of the tradition that] he brought the Torah to each and every nation, and the essence of their souls refused to accept the divine actions, for Israel were prepared for the Torah from the perspec-

⁴²⁵ See Judah Loewe of Prague, *Hiddushei Aggadot*, 4: 20.

⁴²⁶ See reference above, n. 422.

⁴²⁷ Babylonian Talmud, *Yevamot* 61a.

⁴²⁸ *Gevurot ha-Shem*, 2: 171. The position adopted by Maharal is anticipated by Abraham Azulai, *Hesed le-Avraham*, 6: 3, pp. 241–2. According to Azulai, with respect to the ‘corporeal governance’ (*hanhagat ha-guf*) there is no distinction between Israel and the nations, but with respect to ‘celestial governance’ (*hanhagat ha-shamayim*) there is a distinction for the nations are under the ‘authority of the external archons’ (*sheliṭat ha-sarim ha-ḥiṣoniyyim*) and draw sustenance when impurity spreads, whereas Israel is under the ‘authority of the supernal holiness’ (*sheliṭat ha-qedushshah ha-elyonah*) and draw sustenance when purity spreads. On the qualitative difference of Israel and the other nations, see *ibid.* 4: 47, pp. 164–6; 7: 27, p. 287.

⁴²⁹ See *Be’er ha-Golah*, 121.

tive of the level of their souls. . . . This is what the [sages] blessed be their memory, said, ‘you are called *adam*, but the idolatrous nations are not called *adam*’. The explanation of this matter is that there is a unique difference between the human and the rest of animate beings, for the human has a divine soul (*nefesh elohit*), and those who have a divine soul are prepared for the divine matters such as prophecy and the holy spirit. This matter is found only amongst the nation that God, may he be blessed, chose. Therefore, they alone are called *adam* in perfection since they have all that is appropriate for one who is called *adam* in particular, for they have the divine gradation, which is not natural. Therefore, they are called *adam*. On account of this the commandments, which are the divine actions, are attributed exclusively to Israel in perfection.⁴³⁰

Despite the effort on the part of Judah Loewe to accord a divine status to all people in virtue of the image of God with which all humans are supposedly created, in the end he too embraces an anthropological ideal that distinguishes in an essential way between Israel and the nations. The cultural destiny of the Jewish people, their sanctity, can be realized only behind a fence, as it were, that is, only when they remain apart from the nations. On the surface there is no visible difference, as Jew and non-Jew share in the anatomical structure of the *homo sapiens*, but beneath the surface there is a vital difference: the Jew is connected to the internal core and the non-Jew to the external shell. The talmudic dictum that reserves the name *adam* to Israel is to be understood precisely in terms of the ascetic idea of negating the corporeal body in relation to the spiritual form expressed somatically through the Torah. Again, to cite Maharal’s own words:

Thus [the sages], blessed be their memory, said, ‘you are called *adam*, but the nations are not called *adam*’. We have explained this matter in its place, for the divine image was given only to Israel and not to the nations. . . . ‘You are called *adam*, but the nations are not called *adam*’, even so they also have something of the form of a human (*šurat adam*), for in several places they are called *adam*. However, there is a difference, for with respect to Israel the divine image is the essence, and everything is inferior in relation to the image, for the image is separate from the body and thus everything is nullified in relation to it. . . . The nations have an image that is of a physical nature . . . and the image is nullified in relation to them for it is not an incorporeal image as in the case of Israel.

Inasmuch as the ontic status of the Jews is such that they are uniquely linked to the internal (*penimi*) matter, it follows that they have exclusive access to esoteric wisdom. One of the ways that Maharal expresses this idea is by referring to the rabbinic restriction on a Jew drinking wine prepared by a Gentile, *yayin neseekh*. The stringency in this matter is explained in terms of

⁴³⁰ Judah Loewe of Prague, *Tif'eret Yisra'el*, ch. 1, pp. 91–2.

the rabbinic maxim *nikhmas yayin yaša sod*, 'If one takes in wine, the secret will emerge',⁴³¹ that is, just as wine is made from the juice that is squeezed out of the grape, the secret is the innermost meaning that may be elicited from the letter of the text.⁴³²

We may conclude that in the thought of this eminent sixteenth-century rabbinic figure there is an inner struggle between a rationalist approach that would minimize the ontic difference between Israel and the nations and the mythic notion rooted in the aggadic imagination and further enhanced by kabbalistic anthropology. Even when Jewish thinkers have been more inclined to a philosophical anthropology and thereby acknowledge that all human beings are interrelated, if they have been influenced by works of kabbalah they could not help but maintain the ontological difference separating Jew and non-Jew. Consider, for example, the following comment of the eighteenth-century figure Jonathan Eybeschuetz:

Know that there is a fixed principle⁴³³ in the mouth of all the philosophers, and the Rambam made great use of it in the *Moreh Nevukhim*, that the human species in general (*min enoshi bikhelal*) is one man (*ish ehad*). And just as a person (*adam ehad*) is formed and composed of many inner and outer limbs, sinews, arteries, nerves, and the like, so the human species is composed of many nations . . . and even I admit to them that this is logically sound. The entire human species in general can be considered one man with respect to the nations, but the people of Israel are not included, for they have no relationship (*shayyakhut*) to or alliance (*hibbur*) with them at all, and they are not included in their group. Just as one would say that the vegetative is not included in the same species as the inanimate, so Israel vis-à-vis the nations are another species and another group. Therefore, in the human species (*ha-min enoshi*), there are two human beings (*benei adam*), the species of the nations comprised together as one human and the species of the holy nation, Israel, in another human . . . we are called the 'man of the chariot' (*adam de-merkavah*), for the Lord dwells upon us, and the nations are called the 'demonic man' (*adam beliyy'al*), as the spirit of impurity rules [over them], and this is the statement of Balaam, 'They are a people that dwells apart, not reckoned among the nations' (Num. 23: 9).⁴³⁴

Eybeschuetz accepts the philosophical classification of the unity of all human beings, but he radically alters its meaning by assuming that the one species of people referred to by philosophers is the human form on the side of the demonic, *adam beliyy'al*, which is set in contrast with the human form on the side of the divine, *adam de-merkavah*, embodied in the people of Israel.

⁴³¹ Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 38a.

⁴³² *Gevurot ha-Shem*, 2: 198–9.

⁴³³ Literally, 'fixed pole' (*yated taqu'a*), which I have rendered in accord with its figurative meaning.

⁴³⁴ Eybeschuetz, *Ya'arot Devash*, 1: 85–6.

Needless to say, numerous other sources could have been cited to substantiate the claim that the radical division between Jew and non-Jew articulated by medieval kabbalists has persisted as a major influence on the cultural formation of pious Jews. No less a figure than Abraham Isaac Kook, to whom I briefly referred in the Introduction, preserved the kabbalistic orientation in spite of his attempt to assign a more positive role to non-Jews:

Israel amongst the nations is comparable to the human being amongst the creatures. The creatures have many advantages that are not in the human being, but the general combination of the virtues, and the spiritual ascent through them, to apprehend by means of the intellect the use of the faculties comprised within him in potentiality and actuality, the human achieves on the highest level in the world. Similarly, there are many nations who have a special capability that is greater than that capability in Israel, but Israel is in the category of the summation of humanity in its entirety, for they gather in themselves the virtue of all the nations, and they unify in themselves in an ideal manner the holiness and sublime unity. 'And who is like your people Israel, a unique nation on earth?' (2 Sam. 7: 23).⁴³⁵

The full force of the ontological division between Jew and non-Jew is neutralized to some degree by Kook who, in a manner similar to Maharal, maintained that all human beings, and not just Jews, are created in God's image. Articulating what ostensibly appears to be an even more progressive attitude, Kook acknowledged that other nations may have qualities in virtue of which they are superior to Israel. Moreover, the Jewish people can be elevated to their exalted, spiritual state only if they seek to comprehend the *mentalité* of other nations, to learn the mannerisms and attributes distinctive to each culture; in this fashion, the love of humanity (*ha-ahavah ha-enoshit*) is firmly established. In unmistakable opposition to the kabbalistic orientation, Kook states that 'what causes one to see that which is outside the boundary of the unique nation, even if it is outside the boundary of Israel, as only filth and impurity, is one of the worst forces of darkness that brings about a general destruction of the entire good and spiritual edifice whose light every sensitive soul anticipates'.⁴³⁶

In spite of this honourable display of sensitivity to the other, Kook could not free himself from the claim that the Jewish people have a special destiny in the history of human civilization that marks them as substantially different

⁴³⁵ Kook, *Shemonah Qevašim*, 1: 94. An alternative version of the passage I cited appears in Kook, *Orot*, 129–30, and see *ibid.* 151–8. Concerning the newly published edition of Kook's diaries, see Roznek, 'Who Is Afraid'.

⁴³⁶ Kook, *Orot ha-Qodesh*, 4: 405. On the relation between Israel and the nations of the world in Kook's religious philosophy, see Yaron, *Philosophy of Rav Kook*, 285–321; Bin-Nun, 'Nationalism, Humanity, and the Community of Israel', 169–208; Ish-Shalom, *Rav Avraham Itzhak HaCohen Kook*, 127–37; *id.*, 'Tolerance', 188–95.

from all other ethnic groups. He struggled nobly to accentuate the universalistic dimension of the tradition, attempting to frame claims to particularity in a broader humanistic context, but in the end he too could not escape the deep-rooted ethnocentrism that has sustained and nourished Jewish religious faith through the ages. Consider the following diary entry, which unsurprisingly never found its way into the published collections of Kook's writings:

On account of the divine height (*ha-govah ha-elohi*) of the essential Jewish thought (*ha-maḥshavah ha-yisre'elit*), the words cannot come forth in their manifest clarity, and poetry (*ha-shirah*) and metaphor (*ha-remez*) necessarily must be only vessels through which the secret supernal light of Israel (*or yisra'el ha-sodi ha-elyon*) comes to be seen. All the sublime and divine thought of the nations can be clothed in language and a clear idiom since they are not elevated above the level of speech, for 'he chose us of all nations and he elevated us above every language',⁴³⁷ even from the holy language, in the aspect of language, he elevated us above it, for we are submerged in the essence of holiness . . . Accordingly, our spirits should not be lowered in our midst if we see that wise men of the nations express some spiritual, divine idea in words seemingly clearer than the sages of Israel, the supernal holy ones, for in truth, even though there appears to be a common denominator in the external enunciation of the thought, our ways [are distinguished] from their ways, and our thoughts from their thoughts, 'as the heavens are high above the earth' (Ps. 103: 11). And had they come to emphasize our inner point, they would have been literally mute. Thus we await the day to come, 'For then I will make the peoples pure of speech, so that they all invoke the Lord by name' (Zeph. 3: 9).⁴³⁸

In a moment of brutally honest introspection, Kook acknowledges that ideas of a divine nature may be more adequately expressed in the languages of non-Jewish nations. The ostensible weakness signifies, however, the strength of the Jews: since they are connected to the inward core of holiness, the truth they bear witness to is above all linguistic formulations, including that of Hebrew.⁴³⁹ To be sure, the passage ends with citation of a verse that portends the messianic vision of every nation speaking the pure speech (*safah berurah*), which is related to evocation of the name. The eschatological doctrine narrows the gap separating Israel and the nations, but it is precisely the presence of such a gap that necessitates and makes possible that doctrine. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that in another passage Kook notes that the two matters that are 'illumined in Israel' consist of the 'pure ethos' (*ha-musar*

⁴³⁷ According to the traditional liturgical formulation of the *qiddush* (blessing of sanctification recited over a cup of wine) for the three festivals, Tabernacles, Passover, and Pentecost. See Baer, *Seder Avodat Yisra'el*, 366.

⁴³⁸ *Shemonah Qevašim*, 1: 340.

⁴³⁹ On the inadequacy of language to express spiritual truth, and the 'spiritual pain' connected thereto, see *Shemonah Qevašim*, 1: 244.

ha-tahor), which extends to all aspects of existence, and the knowledge (*ha-yedi'ah*) that flows from the recitation of the divine name—the former is compared to the circumference of a circle and the latter to the inner core. Both aspects play a vital part of the mission of the Jewish people to radiate the light of messiah in the world, an illumination thought to be advantageous for the spiritual advancement of all nations, but they are nevertheless the unique patrimony of the Jews and are thus markers of their present superiority.⁴⁴⁰

To cite one more of countless texts that illustrate the point: reflecting on the theme of Hanukah, the festival of light in which the 'Jewish spirit' (*ruah yisra'el*) prevailed over the 'Hellenistic spirit' (*ruah ha-yevani*), Kook wrote that the 'holy light', which is symbolized by the flame of the menorah, that sustains all life in the 'essence of its purity' is hidden in the 'holy nation' that 'bears the banner of the claim of holiness in its purity in the world'.⁴⁴¹ As a nation Jews are endowed with a mystical mission that is linked especially to the geopolitical hope of returning to the land and rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem. The 'influx of secrets' (*ha-shefa ha-razi*), also referred to as the 'spiritual wellspring' (*ha-ma'yan ha-ruhani*) or the 'effluence of the holy spirit' (*ha-shefa shel ruah ha-qodesh*), is the 'great spiritual inheritance' (*ha-rekhush ha-ruhani ha-gadol*) of the Jewish people, the 'sacred wisdom' (*hokhmat ha-qodesh*) that shines only in the land of Israel.⁴⁴² In another passage he expresses the matter in terms of the difference between the Tetragrammaton, which is unique to the Jews, and all the other divine names, which may be ascertained through reason and thus are potentially available to all human beings.

All the holy names are universal (*kelaliyyim*), a concept of divinity (*mussag ha-elohut*) that everyone who has an intellect in his brain and feeling in his heart can express and grasp, to desire it and to be bound to its matters. But 'who is like your people, a unique nation', who are bound to the truth of divinity (*amitut ha-elohut*), which is revealed only by way of miracle and wonder, through the way of the absolute truth of the supernal holy spirit, the speculum that shines. It is written 'this is my name to

⁴⁴⁰ Kook, *Orot*, 140; *Shemonah Qevašim*, 1: 281.

⁴⁴¹ Kook, *Ma'amerei ha-Re'eiyah*, 150. The special mission of the Jews is linked by Kook to the kabbalah, that is, the possession of the esoteric wisdom imparts to Israel special status, and even though it is not possible for the nations of the world at large to comprehend the mystical knowledge promulgated by the Jews, they benefit from it. Interestingly, in one passage (*Orot ha-Qodesh*, 1: 86–7), Kook relates the desire of the 'many nations' to ascend to the Temple Mount to a lower level of prophecy (according to the rabbinic locution, the vision of the speculum that does not shine) that the Jews disseminate to the nations, whereas the higher level (the vision of the speculum that shines) relates to the specific task of the Jews to be the 'kingdom of priests and a holy nation' (Exod. 19: 6).

⁴⁴² *Orot ha-Qodesh*, 1: 133–5.

conceal' (Exod. 3: 15),⁴⁴³ for it is impossible to pronounce it in the dark world the whole time that the light of Israel is not manifest in his holy dwelling place, the house of his life, the eternal temple.⁴⁴⁴

In his inimitable poetic way, Kook appropriated the esoteric tradition, rendering it contemporary to his peers, maintaining both the distinctive comportment of Judaism and the universalist dimension of its messianic vision. The return to the land and the rebuilding of the temple is, from Kook's vantage-point, beneficial to all inhabitants of the world, but there can be no question of privileging Israel's claim to the land in general and to the Temple Mount in Jerusalem in particular. The truth of divinity, the vocalization of the ineffable name, is manifest in its full radiance only in this place and under these conditions.

CONTEMPORARY RAMIFICATIONS: REPRESSION AND THE POLITICS OF KABBALAH

I will conclude this chapter by mentioning three contemporary kabbalistic works composed in the modern state of Israel that exemplify the lingering and, in my judgement, pernicious impact of the older symbolism. So that there is no misunderstanding, let me say unequivocally, for the record, that I am not suggesting Jewish sources have a monopoly of utilizing polemical images and rhetorics of difference hatched in an earlier period in history. A similar phenomenon, for instance, can be found in contemporary Islamic sources in portrayals of Jews.⁴⁴⁵ However, I am limiting myself to kabbalistic texts as that is my chief focus in these pages.

The first illustration is the work *El Qeş ha-Tiqqun*, 'Concerning the End of the Rectification', by Zvi Ryback,⁴⁴⁶ which was originally published in 1984 and a second time in an expanded form in 2000,⁴⁴⁷ the date that the author

⁴⁴³ The literal translation of the verse *zeh shemi le-olam* should be 'this is my name forever', but I have rendered it in accordance with the rabbinic reading, which is the basis for Kook's exegesis, *zeh shemi le'alem*, 'this is my name to conceal' (Babylonian Talmud, Pesahim 50a; Qiddushin 71a).

⁴⁴⁴ Kook, *Hadarav*, 40–1.

⁴⁴⁵ For instance, consider the accounts of the symbol of the cross and the crucifixion in Muhammad Kāmil Husayn discussed in Leirvik, *Images of Jesus Christ in Islam*, 176–80. Briefly, according to Husayn's interpretation, the crucifixion of Jesus on the part of the Jews was an attempt to crucify human conscience, the root for all evil inflicting humanity.

⁴⁴⁶ For a biographical sketch, see Ryback, *El Qeş ha-Tiqqun*, 10–16. I hope someday to write a separate study on this figure.

⁴⁴⁷ In 'Ontology', 133, n. 11, I referred to the book as an 'anonymous eschatological work'. I was misled by the fact that the first edition (1984) did not include the name of the author.

himself marked as the beginning of the messianic era, the ‘end of days’ (*qeṣ ha-yamim*), which is described as the ‘end of the exile of Edom’ (*qeṣ galut edom*) that ensues 240 years before the conclusion of the sixth millennium.⁴⁴⁸ This contemporary treatise on messianic eschatology is filled with negative portrayals of other religions based primarily on symbolism culled from older kabbalistic sources. The anthropological stance adopted by Ryback is that Jews are ‘men of spirit’ who embody the true human form for they alone are created in the divine image, which is identified with the rational soul (*neshamah ha-sikhilit*), whereas other nations are accorded the inferior ontic status of being ‘men of nature’, for they are controlled by physical desires of the animal soul (*nefesh ha-behemit*).⁴⁴⁹ The distinction is also formulated in ritualistic terms: the people of Israel have been given the Torah so that they can annul the evil inclination or sensory impulses and thereby manifest the spirit of holiness, but the non-Jews have no divine imperative to fulfill the commandments and thus they constitute the body of impurity (*qomat ha-ṭum’ah*), which is the demonic other side (*siṭra aḥra*).⁴⁵⁰ The messianic rectification consists, therefore, of Israel separating from the other nations—an idea that Ryback in one passage expresses by noting that the letters of *ha-tiqqun*, ‘the rectification’, are the same as *ha-nittuq*, ‘the severing’⁴⁵¹—so that holy and defiled will not be mixed. Alternatively expressed, the ‘great rectification’ (*ha-tiqqun ha-gadol*) demanded of Israel is ‘to turn the physical attributes into intelligibles until the supernal mind is in the blood of the soul . . . to transform it into an enlightened and spiritual being’.⁴⁵² The eschatological task can only be realized within the boundaries of the land of Israel when Jews are physically separated from the pernicious impact of the impurity of the other nations.⁴⁵³ In line with older texts, the two major typological symbols for the demonic potencies embraced by Ryback are Edom and Ishmael, but in this work the former represents both Nazi Germany and Communist Russia⁴⁵⁴ and the

⁴⁴⁸ *El Qeṣ ha-Tiqqun*, 549–50. It is of interest to note that the poster advertising this book, which I saw on billboards in certain sections in Jerusalem during my stay there in October–December 2000, declared that the treatise is ‘obligatory for every soul in Israel in these difficult times to help one be saved from confusion’. Those familiar with the critical events of September 2000, the visit of Ariel Sharon to the Temple Mount, and the subsequent revival of the Palestinian resistance movement, utilizing the new form of terror whereby human beings turn themselves into bombs in suicide missions, will understand the poignancy of the admonition that all Israelis would benefit from studying Ryback’s kabbalistic account of Israel’s messianic mission and the eventual defeat of the other nations of the world.

⁴⁴⁹ *El Qeṣ ha-Tiqqun*, 33, 430.

⁴⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 28, 35, 222.

⁴⁵¹ *Ibid.* 20.

⁴⁵² *Ibid.* 33.

⁴⁵³ *Ibid.* 36.

⁴⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 425. In some passages the Nazis are identified as Amaleq. See e.g. p. 36, and compare the study of Greenberg cited above, n. 41.

latter Islam.⁴⁵⁵ The ‘war for the rectification of this world’ (*milhemet ha-tiqqun shel olam ha-zeh*), whose goal is the annihilation of evil and the establishment of the world that is entirely good, occurs ‘when the two shells will be abrogated, the shell of Ishmael and the shell of Esau, one after the other, just as the days of their rest are on either side of Sabbath, Friday for the one and Sunday for the other’.⁴⁵⁶ According to Ryback, the contemporary moment in history is one in which the forces of Amaleq, the ‘spirit of deceit and the impure fire’,⁴⁵⁷ which is personified in the Soviet empire, and the serpent, which is incarnate in the Arab states,⁴⁵⁸ must be subdued and destroyed by the pious worship of Israel, and especially through the study of esoteric lore.⁴⁵⁹ In particular, Ishmael, which is clearly a coded reference to contemporary Muslims (particularly those who populate Arab states), is associated with the corporeal, for this nation is the demonic shell that is not occupied at all in the rectification of the stature of *Shekhinah*.⁴⁶⁰

The second example of the persistence of the degradation of non-Jewish nations in a contemporary source that I will mention is found in a text published in the last two decades of the twentieth century, *Gilluy ha-Or ha-Ganuz le-Yisra’el* (‘Disclosure of the Light that is Hidden for Israel’), a massive and rambling compilation of traditional kabbalistic symbolism composed by Judah Kalfon:

The secret of the [demonic] shells (*sod ha-qelippot*) is that they refer to the nations of the world, worshippers of the stars and constellations, for they are the seventy nations corresponding to the seventy archons appointed above . . . the seventy arteries of the liver, which is the secret of Samael. . . Ishmael is the shell of the attribute of mercy (*hesed*) of Abraham and Esau is the shell of the attribute of strength (*gevurah*) of Isaac. These two shells are the principle ones and they comprise all seventy archons . . . for these two shells are Samael and his mate (*bat zugo*), Ishmael and Esau . . . Samael and Lilith the serpent. They comprise all seventy officers of the worshippers of the stars and constellations, from the right Ishmael and from the left Esau.⁴⁶¹

This fascinating text, which in part is based on the position adopted by Gikatilla in the late thirteenth century that I discussed above, deserves an

⁴⁵⁵ *El Qeş ha-Tiqqun*, 425.

⁴⁵⁶ *Ibid.* 106. On other occasions the author speaks of the three shells of impurity: pride, lust, and jealousy. Amaleq is correlated with the first of these vices, which is related to the fact that of all the nations this one expresses its hatred for the God of Israel openly (see p. 164).

⁴⁵⁷ *Ibid.* 106–7.

⁴⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 549–50.

⁴⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 20, 29–30, 99–100, 548. Just as disclosure of secrets is indicative of the separation of Israel and the nations, the need to conceal secrets reflects an exilic condition wherein Israel is surrounded by its enemies. See *ibid.* 28.

⁴⁶⁰ See *ibid.* 153.

⁴⁶¹ Kalfon, *Gilluy ha-Or*, 7: 773.

independent treatment, but for my immediate purposes suffice it to reiterate that in this contemporary work the negative portrayal of the non-Jewish nations persists, for they are depicted as the mystery of the demonic shells. The chief of these shells are Ishmael and Esau, Samael and Lilith; the former is identified as the shell of the divine attribute of mercy associated with Abraham and the latter as the shell of the divine attribute of strength associated with Isaac. It is noteworthy that the traditional symbolism of Ishmael and Esau, which refer respectively to Islam and Christianity, has been modified in this work, for Esau represents the feminine partner of Ishmael, the serpent Lilith in relation to Samael. The latter appears here as the archon of Ishmael (or Islam) rather than the archon of Edom (or Christianity). We may surmise that the current political reality of the modern state of Israel has led this kabbalist to modify the traditional symbolism: although the demonic power still comprises Edom and Ishmael, the former is not identified as Christianity, but as the feminine aspect of Islam. The force of impurity, therefore, is related exclusively to Islam.⁴⁶² In line with other kabbalists, Kalfon envisions a messianic state wherein the demonic shell will be restored to holiness and evil will be transformed into good. As he puts it: 'The souls of the nation of Israel are from holy Adam who was divided into the sparks of the people of Israel, in the souls of Israel, for he is the primal Adam, who corresponds to the nation of Israel, and the shell is contained in holiness, and in the end everything will be pure, and comprehend that the evil inclination will be purified and it will become the good inclination.'⁴⁶³ Prior to the eschatological rectification, however, the force of holiness, which is embodied in the Jewish people, is pitted dualistically against the force of unholiness that is manifest in the seventy nations, the offspring of Samael.⁴⁶⁴

I end with a passage from the recently published treatise *Lahaṭ ha-Ḥerev ha-Mithappekhet* ('Fiery Ever-turning Sword'). I am not certain of the identity

⁴⁶² It should be noted that in some passages of the *Ra'aya Meheimna* stratum of the zoharic corpus, the serpent is associated with Ishmael and Samael with Edom. Cf. *Zohar* 3: 124a, 246b. See also the section from *Tiqqunei Zohar* in *Zohar Ḥadash*, 33d, where Ishmael is identified as the filth with which the serpent inseminated Eve and Edom is described as the filth that is cast outside. In other contexts, the anonymous kabbalist follows the main body of *Zohar* and links Esau to the serpent; see e.g. *Tiqqunei Zohar*, § 59, 93a. This may reflect a more negative stance vis-à-vis Islam on the part of this anonymous kabbalist. For the opposite view, that this author was more conciliatory towards Islam than Christianity, see Giller, *Enlightened*, 51 and other relevant references cited on p. 146, n. 114. On the ambivalent attitude of the zoharic authors to Islam, see Kiener, 'Image of Islam', 62–5.

⁴⁶³ *Gilluy ha-Or*, vol. 2-4, p. 96. The philosophical basis for this eschatological view regarding the transformation of evil into good is the ontic assumption that as the light descends down the chain of being it becomes more reified and thus the holy becomes impure. See *ibid.* 90.

⁴⁶⁴ *Ibid.* 110. A typical account of the dualistic orientation is offered in *ibid.* 92: 'The air of the land of Israel purifies and makes wise, but the air of the lands of the nations renders impure, and the shells do not rule in the land of Israel.'

of the author, but what is important for the purposes of this chapter is that in this book, which purports to present to the reader ‘everything you wanted to know about the human species’,⁴⁶⁵ we find yet again affirmation of the traditional kabbalistic position that distinguishes radically between the ontological status of Jew and non-Jew. The author goes so far as to say that the ‘central point in Judaism’ (*ha-nequddah ha-merkkazit be-yahadut*) relates to the belief that only Jews constitute the ‘holy sparks’ that must be redeemed from the captivity of the serpent into which they have fallen. Elaborating the theme, the author notes:

Even though there are millions of people in the world, they all receive their souls from one source of impurity that primal Adam released when he ate from the Tree of Knowledge. That source existed prior to the transgression when it received the possibility to exist in the world. In fact, however, it has no influence through its actions on anything in creation, and that is because the Creator has no desire for their actions, as it says, ‘The nations are but a drop in the bucket, reckoned as dust on a balance; the very coastlands he lifts like motes’ (Isa. 40: 15). All of his will is to gather to himself in return those holy souls—the holy seed of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—as it says, ‘But we, your people, the sons of your covenant, the sons of Abraham, the one who loved you, with whom you took an oath on Mount Moriah, the seed of Isaac, your sacrifice who was bound to the tabernacle, the community of Jacob, your firstborn son, for out of the love with which you loved him and out of the joy with which you made him joyous, you called him Israel and Jesuhrun.’⁴⁶⁶ Then the world be rectified (*yetuqqan ha-olam*), and all will benefit, both the nations and the people of Israel.⁴⁶⁷

In an utterly reductionist way, the author, clearly influenced and sustained by kabbalistic rhetoric, contrasts all the nations of the world with the Jewish people on grounds that only the latter are the holy seed. In another section of the book, the chapter that deals with the truth of Moses and the Torah, the author castigates Christians and Muslims in the harshest of terms, referring to their respective religions as deceitful lies.⁴⁶⁸ There is a particular vitriol expressed with regard to Jews who assimilate (*ha-mitbolelim*). Indeed, the hardships that have befallen the Jewish people are causally linked to the assimilationists. The Holocaust, we are told, occurred on account of this segment of the Jewish population, and Reform Jews and other non-traditional groups in America are blamed for ‘inviting the next Holocaust’.⁴⁶⁹

⁴⁶⁵ This statement appears as the subtitle of the book on the cover, although it is missing on the title-page itself.

⁴⁶⁶ The passage is taken from the traditional morning liturgy; see *Seder Avodat Yisra’el*, 45. As the editor duly notes, the liturgical passage is based on formulations found in older rabbinic sources, e.g. *Mekhilta*, Shirah, ch. 10, p. 150.

⁴⁶⁷ *Lahaṭ ha-Herev*, 274–5.

⁴⁶⁸ *Ibid.* 77–93.

⁴⁶⁹ *Ibid.* 83.

Otherring the Other: Eschatological Effacing of Ontic Boundaries

Opposites are not the same
for the same reason they are the same.

(Jack Kerouac)

POLEMICAL IMAGES OF CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM IN ZOHARIC LITERATURE

In the Jewish Middle Ages, one of the prominent ways for the scribal elite of the minority culture to deal with the majority was through polemic. Limited by socio-political and economic factors, the avenue of disputation afforded rabbinic exegetes an opportunity to aggrandize their own situation and to deprecate the privileged status of the majority. If the minority assumes the position of the proverbial other, then the stratagem of polemic provided the mechanism by means of which the role of othering was inverted. By marginalizing the central power, the marginal power could vicariously occupy the centre, if only in a temporary gesture of empowering co-religionists so that they could withstand the violence and persecution fostered by the officially sanctioned rhetoric of difference.

An impressive number of scholars have discussed the role of polemic in medieval Jewish society from different vantage-points. The main bodies of literature that have been mined for this purpose are the written records of public disputations, theological and philosophical treatises of a polemical character, and exegetical works wherein the confrontational dimension is shrouded behind figures of the biblical past. By contrast, relatively few scholars have paid attention to the rich corpus of kabbalah as a repository for the attitude of medieval Jews towards Christianity and Islam, the other religions that dominated their imaginary landscape.¹ This lacuna is lamentable

¹ See Bacher, 'Judaeo-Christian Polemics'; *Jesus Christ in the Talmud*; Krauss, 'Un texte cabbalistique'; id., *Jewish-Christian Controversy*, 201; Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, 149–50, 154–61, 244, n. 92; Wolfson, 'Re/membering'. See also references cited in Ch. 1, n. 31.

as the relevant kabbalistic texts that can be utilized for this purpose emerged in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, precisely the time when writing of polemic flourished amongst Jewish authors in European centres of Western Christendom such as France, Germany, Italy, and Spain. In this chapter I will focus on images of Edom and Ishmael, the typological representations of Christianity and Islam respectively, as they emerge from various textual layers of zoharic literature. I will also be concerned with the reverberations of these symbolic images in kabbalistic sources from later historical periods, with particular interest in the crossing of ontic boundaries engendered by this symbolism in Sabbatian messianism.

It is evident from any number of passages in the zoharic corpus that the orientation towards other nations is coloured particularly by the acceptance of two major civilizations outside of Judaism whose power derived from claims to prophetic or scriptural authority. As Isaiah Tishby already noted, an important literary factor that supports the argument for the medieval provenance of *Zohar* is the relationship expressed therein between Judaism and the religions of Christianity and Islam.² An interesting example of the exclusionist orientation is found in the zoharic reworking of the aggadic motif that before God gave the Torah to Israel, he offered it to all the other nations.³ According to one passage incorporated in *Zohar*, God offered the Torah to just two nations prior to Israel, Edom and Ishmael.⁴ The particular language of the zoharic text is worthy of citation:

When the holy One, blessed be he, desired to give the Torah to Israel, he went and offered it to the children of Esau, but they did not accept it, as it is written, ‘The Lord came from Sinai, he shone upon them from Seir’ (Deut. 33: 2), but they did not want to accept it. He went to the children of Ishmael, but they did not want to receive it, as it is written, ‘He appeared from Mount Paran’ (ibid.). He returned to Israel. Thus it has been taught, but now a question must be asked. . . . The verse does not make sense and one must ask, when the holy One went to Seir, to which of their prophets was he

² Tishby, *Wisdom*, 68–71.

³ Babylonian Talmud, *Avodah Zarah 2b*. The passage is noted previously by Tishby, *Wisdom*, 69.

⁴ In *Mekhilta*, Yitro, ch. 5, p. 221, and *Sifre on Deuteronomy*, § 343, p. 396, God is said to have offered the Torah to all of the nations before he revealed it to Israel, although only a select number of nations are specified by name. Included in the list of nations one finds Edom (who refused the Torah because of the command not to murder) and Ishmael (who refused on account of the command not to steal), but neither source matches the zoharic text verbatim. See also *Pesiqta Rabbati*, 21: 4–5, pp. 438–41; *Midrash Aseret ha-Dibberot*, 68. It is of interest to note that Judah Loewe of Prague, *Tiferet Yisra’el*, ch. 1, p. 91, cites a ‘midrash’ to the effect that God offered the Torah to Esau and Ishmael before he revealed it to Israel. Perhaps such a midrash was the source for the author of the zoharic text. In *Midrash ha-Ne’elam* on Ruth (*Zohar Hadash*, 83c), there is a brief recounting of the aggadic statement that God offered the Torah to all the other nations prior to giving it to Israel.

revealed? And when he went to Paran, to which of their prophets was he revealed? If you say that he was revealed to all of them, this is not the case at all except with respect to Israel alone, by means of Moses.⁵

The initial reading of the verse, ‘The Lord came from Sinai, he shone upon them from Seir’ (Deut. 33: 2), is undermined in the zoharic text on the premise that in neither Christianity (Seir) nor Islam (Paran) were there credible prophets to whom God could have revealed himself. It is also not possible to say that the epiphany occurred for the community of believers at large, for such a phenomenon is limited exclusively to the Israelites who experienced the divine revelation at Sinai as mediated through the prophecy of Moses. We may conclude, therefore, that in addition to emphasizing that Christianity and Islam rejected the Torah,⁶ the authors of *Zohar* (in line with the philosophical position of Judah Halevi,⁷ which in part is based on midrashic precedents⁸) deny the prophetic claims of both traditions. Prophecy is unique to Israel and hence the contention of both religions regarding a foundational prophet (Jesus and Muḥammad⁹) must be judged

⁵ *Zohar* 3: 192a. This zoharic passage is cited and analysed at length by Sedeq, *Ner Mišwah*, 102b–103a, from which he draws the following conclusion: ‘There is a difference between these and those, between Esau and Ishmael, for Ishmael returned in repentance, as it is alluded to [in the verse] ‘You shall go to your ancestors in peace’ (Gen. 15: 15), and the children of this one are not like the children of the other one.’ The privileging of Islam over Christianity is, as I note in the body of this chapter, a well-known motif in medieval sources, although it is not universally affirmed, and even within the zoharic corpus itself there are conflicting opinions.

⁶ It is of interest to consider the paraphrase of the zoharic passage in Ḥazzan, *Qohelet ben Dawid*, 67a: ‘In *Zohar*, in the section of Balaq, [it is written] that God brought the Torah to the archon of Esau and he said, “What is written in it?” [He replied] “Do not murder” (Exod. 20: 13). He said that this involved a nullification of the blessing of his father, “By your sword you shall live” (Gen. 27: 40). Similarly, with respect to the archon of Ishmael [God offered the Torah], and he said [in response to the question concerning what is written in the Torah] “Do not commit adultery” (Exod. 20: 13). He did not receive it because his father promised him that he “shall be a wild ass of a man” (Gen. 16: 12). On account of these two commandments, which they could not accept, they did not want the Torah.’ The association of murder and Esau (or Christianity) and adultery and Ishmael (or Islam) is repeated in *Tiqqunei Zohar* § 37, 78b: ‘“Do not commit adultery” corresponds to the serpent, the woman of harlotry, and “do not murder” corresponds to Samael.’ On the identification of Esau as Samael and Ishmael as the serpent in the *Ra’aya Meheimna* stratum of zoharic literature, see *Zohar* 3: 124a, 246b. On the sexual licentiousness of Islam, see the view of Maimonides cited below in n. 137. The claim on the part of medieval Jews that Christians were murderous by nature was countered by the claim on the part of Christians that the Jews were murderous. One of the more striking occurrences of this motif is the Christian interpretation of Jewish acts of martyrdom. See Minty, ‘Kiddush ha-Shem’.

⁷ On the uniqueness of the Jewish people and the prophetic experience in Judah Halevi, see Silman, *Philosopher and Prophet*, 178–80, 189–90. Particularly pertinent is Halevi’s remark in *Sefer ha-Kuzari*, I. 101 that Moses revealed the Torah only to ‘his people’ who shared ‘his language’.

⁸ See Ch. 1, n. 111.

⁹ On the Jewish recognition of Muḥammad’s claim to prophecy, see Ahroni, ‘Some Yemenite’.

false, a judgement that, in turn, undermines the basis for the alleged authority assigned to their respective scriptural canons.¹⁰

There is, however, an additional and more esoteric explanation offered for the initial refusal of the Torah on the part of Esau and Ishmael, the main spiritual competitors with Israel, a secret that explains the scriptural verse that initially seemed problematic. The mystery is disclosed by Simeon ben Yoḥai: 'The Torah came forth from the supernal secret (*raza ila'ah*) of the concealed head of the king, and when it reached the left arm the holy One, blessed be he, saw bad blood increasing in that arm and he said "I must purify and cleanse this arm and if this blood is not controlled it will blemish everything; every blemish, however, must be purified from here."¹¹ To comprehend this passage the reader must be apprised of two axiomatic claims affirmed throughout zoharic literature in particular and in kabbalistic texts more generally: the identification of Torah and the name YHWH and the further identification of that name and the sefirotic potencies.¹² The reference to Torah emerging from the concealed head of the king, therefore, should be understood as an allusion to the emanation of the *sefirot* from the supernal aspect of the Godhead, *Keter*, which in the theosophic symbolism affirmed in the bulk of zoharic literature is independent of but inseparable from Ein Sof.¹³ The 'left arm' is a reference

¹⁰ The persistence of envisioning the world in this way is attested in a particularly intriguing way in the section on the 'construction of the shells and the chariot of impurity' from Ḥaver's *Pithḥei She'arim*, in *Mi-Ginzei ha-GR'A*, 216–17: 'All their holy words in the Oral Torah are in the secret of the feminine (*raza de-nuqba*), for she explicates the ways of the Written Torah, which are the five books, the five extremities, *Ḥesed, Gevurah, Tiferet, Neṣaḥ*, and *Hod*, and *Yesod didekhura* joins together the Written Torah and Oral Torah by means of the thirteen principles by which Torah is interpreted . . . and this is in *Yesod* in relation to which thirteen covenants were decreed, and in it the drop of *yod* of the wisdom of Torah is revealed, but the light of Torah remains hidden in the Written Torah and it does not illumine the feminine except by way of a barrier (*derekh dofen*). It goes out in the secret of water to fill this well, *Yesod de-nuqba*, for these are the homilies that they brought forth by means of these thirteen principles explained in the Oral Torah . . . but the light of Torah (*or ha-torah*) remains hidden by the skin (*or*), the *ayin* of *or*, the foreskin that covers the corona of the phallus (*aṭeret berit*), for when the other side has dominion the inner light of Torah cannot be disclosed, and it goes out only in the aspect of water.' Ḥaver goes on to distinguish between two types of water, good and bad, and the sea monsters (*tanninim*) that are found in each (following Gen. 1: 21). In the holy waters, which issue from the 'secret of the drop of the brain', are Leviathan and his female mate who correspond respectively to the Written Torah and Oral Torah. Correspondingly, in the murky waters, which come from the 'empty cistern' (Gen. 37: 24), are two sea monsters linked to the demonic male and female. These forces 'bring forth their heretical ways of Written Torah (*darkhei torah she-bikhetav le-minut*) in the secret of Esau and Ishmael . . . and they are the secret of the two brains, *Ḥokhmah* and *Binah*, of the masculine of the other side' (p. 217).

¹¹ *Zohar* 3: 192b.

¹² *Ibid.* 2: 60b, 87a, 90b; 3: 13b, 19a, 21a, 35b–36a, 73a, 89b, 98b, 159a, 265b, 298b; Scholem, *On the Kabbalah*, 44; Idel, 'Concept of Torah', 58–9; Tishby, *Wisdom*, 284, 293–4, 1086. See further references cited in Ch. 1, n. 352.

¹³ Tishby, *Wisdom*, 242–6.

to the fifth emanation, *Din* or *Gevurah*, that is, the attribute of judgement or strength. In this attribute is found the bad blood that needs to be purified. In the continuation of the passage, the purification is related to the aforementioned motif of God offering Torah to Esau before bestowing it upon Israel. The mystical intent of this idea, the 'supernal secret' to which Simeon ben Yoḥai hinted, is the catharsis of evil from the divine economy. God thus turns initially to Samael, the archon of Esau, but he rejects Torah on account of the commandment prohibiting murder, since his power, which is linked specifically to Mars, is expressed in waging wars and killing others.¹⁴

Samael relinquishes his birthright as the elder, which results in the purging of evil from the left side, but before Israel can receive Torah God discovers there is 'bad blood' as well in the right arm, that is, the fourth emanation, *Ḥesed* or *Gedullah*, the attribute of divine mercy and greatness. To purify this blood God calls upon Rahab, the archon of Ishmael, and offers him the Torah, which he rejects on account of the prohibition against adultery. Ishmael's power derives from sexual intemperance and the excessive procreation that ensues therefrom—this is the intent of the description of Ishmael as *pere adam* (Gen. 16: 12), literally, 'a wild ass of a man', which is connected exegetically to God's blessing of him *we-hifreiti oto we-hirbeiti oto*, 'I will make him fertile and exceedingly numerous' (Gen. 17: 20). The zoharic author turns the blessing on its head for Ishmael's fecundity is linked to a lack of libidinal control, an abandon that is portrayed as the evil aspect of the right side. Insofar as this attribute is symbolized by water, the overindulgence of Rahab, and by implication the people of Ishmael at large, is associated with the blessing of the swarms of fish in the sea, 'Be fertile and increase', *peru u-revu* (Gen. 1: 22).¹⁵ Once again, God brings up the issue of the birthright of the elder and Rahab renounces this privilege and grants it to Isaac and his sons. The purification of the bad blood from the left and right arms of the divine, the attributes of judgement and mercy, the mystery of catharsis, is alluded to in the verse, 'The Lord came from Sinai; he shone upon them from Seir; he appeared from Mount Paran' (Deut. 33: 2), Seir referring

¹⁴ The characterization of Christians as murderous is on occasion linked exegetically to the reference to the 'hands' of Esau in contrast to the 'voice' of Jacob (Gen. 27: 22). For instance, see *Nizzahon Vetus*, 55. See also Abulafia, *Gan Na'ul*, MS Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek 58, fol. 327b (printed edn., p. 36).

¹⁵ The polemical portrayal of Islam may have been inspired by legendary accounts of Muḥammad's extraordinary sexual prowess and virility promoted by Muslims themselves. See Winter, 'Islamic Attitudes', 39. On the depiction of Muḥammad getting drunk and being devoured by swine, see *Nizzahon Vetus*, 217. As Berger points out, *ibid.* 334, the 'story was undoubtedly invented to explain why Muslims refrained from drinking wine and eating pork'. For discussion of this tale in medieval Christian sources, Berger directs the reader to Daniel, *Islam and the West*, 104–5.

to Edom and Paran to Ishmael.¹⁶ What is critical for our purposes is to note the stereotypical representation of Christians as murderous and of Muslims as oversexed.¹⁷

On balance the depiction of Christianity and Islam in *Zohar*, and especially the former, is decidedly negative.¹⁸ As I discussed in the previous chapter, the zoharic authorship draws an absolute distinction between Jews and other nations. The election of Israel as a chosen people is not dependent on the covenant that binds God and the Jews; on the contrary, the covenantal relationship itself is rooted in the presumed ontological superiority of the Jews vis-à-vis other national identities. For the kabbalists whose voices echo in the pages of *Zohar*, and countless others through the generations who have been influenced by this work, only the Jew is properly created in the image of God, for the Jew alone derives from the world of holiness, the pleroma of divine gradations.¹⁹ To be sure, there are important differences between the respective depictions of Christian and Muslim in the main body of *Zohar* and the supplementary zoharic texts, *Ra'aya Meheimna* and *Tiqqunei Zohar*. There is even one passage in the former wherein a more conciliatory note is sounded with respect to both Islam and Christianity. The relevant comment occurs in the section called *Piqqudin*, so named because it deals primarily with the mystical reasons for the divine commandments.²⁰ The seventh of a list of fourteen commandments concerns the ritual of circumcision on the eighth day, and the eighth commandment with the duty to love the convert who assumes the responsibility to be circumcised and thereby enter beneath the

¹⁶ *Zohar* 3: 292b–293a.

¹⁷ It is worth noting that medieval Jewish authors more typically condemned Christian society in terms of sexual licentiousness, which is associated in the zoharic passage with Islam, rather than the thirst for murder. See *Nizzahon Vetus*, 69–70, 99, 223 (in all three passages, the charge of licentiousness is levelled against priests who overtly pledged themselves to a life of celibacy). See Berger's introduction, p. 27. An interesting exception is Nahmanides, who remarked in his Hebrew account of the 1263 disputation in Barcelona, 'Christians spill more blood than all the other nations', although this is immediately followed by the comment, 'but they also commit acts of sexual impropriety'. See Maccoby, *Judaism on Trial*, 121; Chazan, *Fashioning*, 355–6. See also *Book of the Covenant*, 48, wherein Christians are characterized as 'uncircumcised in heart' since they transgress the commandments, commit murder, fornicate, steal, oppress, speak abusively to people, mock, and rob them. On Ishmael's propensity to be engaged in war, see *Zohar* 2: 32a. The two traditions converge in Abraham ben Eliezer ha-Levi, *Nevu'at ha-Yeled*, 22, where the potential for murder initially realized in the figure of Cain is associated with Edom as well as Ishmael.

¹⁸ On the proposed destruction of Edom and Ishmael in the messianic future, see Bachrach, *Emeq ha-Melekh*, 110b.

¹⁹ In addition to the convert, a phenomenon discussed at greater length in this chapter, there is also the category of the pious Gentile, which to some degree problematizes or at least complicates the ontological dualism that has informed the anthropological conception. See Ch. 1, n. 179.

²⁰ For discussion of this section of zoharic literature, see Gottlieb, *Studies*, 215–30.

wings of *Shekhinah*. I will return to the zoharic use of this aggadic image at a later point, but for the moment what is crucial is the description of the right wing: 'From that wing there spreads out to two other nations that are close in their unification [of God] to Israel' (*terein umin aḥaranin de-inun qerivin be-yihuda le-yisra'el*). Corresponding to the two nations beneath the right wing are the two nations beneath the left wing, Amon and Moab.²¹ The locution of this zoharic passage seems to be based on the remark of Naḥmanides in his commentary to Genesis 2: 3: 'At the beginning of the sixth millennium there will come to be a kingdom of a nation that governs, "dreadful and very powerful" (Dan. 7: 7), which comes closer to the truth than the former ones (*mitqarevet el ha-emet yoter min ha-ri'shonim*).' The author of the zoharic text, perhaps following Judah Halevi,²² expands the comment of Naḥmanides to include two nations, which presumably refer to Edom and Ishmael, whose theological foundation approximates the monotheistic basis of Judaism and thus can be accounted heterodoxical.²³

ESAU/EDOM: DEMONIZATION OF THE OTHER

This positive characterization notwithstanding, the vast majority of relevant passages in the zoharic corpus have as their stated aim the affirmation of the unequivocal differentiation of Israel from the other nations and especially

²¹ *Zohar* 1: 13a.

²² According to Halevi, Christianity and Islam are inferior forms of Judaism or poor imitations of the original (*Sefer ha-Kuzari*, II. 32; III. 9), they do not reach the level of converts, and their belief in the unity of God is somewhat tainted by idolatrous elements (IV. 11), but they have the role of preparing the world for the truth of monotheism, and in that sense they play an integral part in the messianic drama of history. See IV. 23, where Israel is depicted as the seed of which the messiah is the fruit, and Edom and Ishmael are the other elements in which the seed grows but that seem to overwhelm the seed. In the end, the other nations will acknowledge the truth of Judaism and all will constitute one tree, the root of which is the prophetically ordained faith of Israel. See Lasker, 'Proselyte Judaism'. Finally, it is worth noting that Halevi's view seems to be reflected in the remarks of Abulafia, *Oṣar Eden Ganuz*, MS Oxford, Bodleian Library 1580, fol. 93a (printed edn., p. 192), that in spite of their innovations, Jesus and Muḥammad had the intent of unifying God, an idea that relates to the more general claim that Christianity and Islam have a critical part to play in the spread of monotheism. On Abulafia's view of Jesus and the Jewish messiah, see Idel, *Studies*, 45–61.

²³ The more conciliatory approach did have an impact on subsequent kabbalists. See e.g. the sermon on Genesis attributed to Ḥayyim Viṭal and published in *Liqquṭim Ḥadashim*, 45–6: 'There are three types in the human species, from the side of holiness that which is called the beginning, which is Israel, the seventy nations at the other end, and the mixed multitude who are intermediary. Ishmael and Esau are not in the category of the seventy nations for they have an aspect of holiness in the secret of the pig (*hazir*) that in the future will return (*lahazor*) to Israel.' On the midrashic interpretation of the name of the pig, see Ch. 3, n. 190.

from Edom and Ishmael. For the most part, in the literary units classified by modern scholars as the main body of *Zohar*, there is no comparison between the animus expressed with regard to Edom and what is expressed with respect to Ishmael, even though there are, as we shall see at a later juncture, passages that treat both Edom and Ishmael in demonic terms. The zoharic authors had a complex and ambiguous relationship to Christianity: conscious appropriation of principle theological and eschatological doctrines on the one hand, and categorical rejection and demonization in the arena of social commerce and exchange on the other. Christianity is portrayed as the socially abhorrent political force that causes Israel to suffer and that incessantly attempts to lure her onto the path of promiscuity and heresy. Indeed, according to the symbolism embraced by kabbalists of the zoharic circle, in line with the invectives typical of medieval Jewish texts,²⁴ Christians are the embodiment of demonic impurity in the world. The point is driven home succinctly in the zoharic exegesis of the words, ‘Your kinsmen who hate you, who spurn you because of Me’ (Isa. 66: 5). The ‘kinsmen’ are identified as the ‘children of Esau,’ that is, the Christians, for ‘there is no nation that mocks Israel to their face and who spit in their faces like the children of Edom, and it is said that they are all impure like a menstruating woman (*niddah*), and this is [the import of the expression] “who spurn you” (*menaddekhem*).’²⁵ The metaphorical comparison of the children of Edom to a *niddah*, based on the biblical idiom *menaddekhem*, discloses an essential dimension of the zoharic understanding of the ontological impurity of Christianity.²⁶ With regard to this issue the zoharic authorship is drawing on the correlation of the blood of menstruation, particularly related to the conception of Jesus (as we find, for example, in some of the recensions of *Toldot Yeshu*), and Christianity employed in medieval Jewish polemical literature; hence the attribution of the title *ben niddah*, ‘son of a menstruant’, to Jesus.²⁷ In the aforementioned zoharic passage, the spiritual attraction of the Church is comparable to seduction of

²⁴ See Abulafia, ‘Invectives’.

²⁵ *Zohar* 2: 188b.

²⁶ The contrast between the ontological grounding of the Jewish soul in the realm of holiness and that of the non-Jewish soul (especially the idolatrous nations, which is a code for Christians) is repeated on many occasions in the zoharic corpus and related kabbalistic literature, as I discussed in detail in Chapter 1. I note, in passing, that in one Qumran fragment, 4Q286, Frag. 7 a, ii, b, c, d, we read of the ‘impure thoughts’ (*maḥshavot niddat ṭum’atemah*) of the spirits (*ruḥot*) that belong to the ‘lot of darkness’ (*goral ḥosekh*). For transcription of the text, see *Poetical and Liturgical Texts*, 27.

²⁷ Krauss, *Das Leben Jesu*, 38–41, 64–8, 118, 139, 140. See the extended discussion in Marienberg, *Niddah*, 159–213, esp. 172–83. On the possibility that the designation *ben niddah* is a later interpolation dating from the fifteenth century, the earlier texts emphasizing that Jesus was the offspring from an adulterous act, see Deutsch, ‘New Evidence’, 182–4. On *Toldot Yeshu*, see Kraus, *Jewish-Christian Controversy*, 12–13; Schlichting, *Ein jüdisches Leben Jesu*; Howard,

the woman during her menstrual period when intercourse is forbidden. Going beyond the normative halakhic restriction against having sexual relations with a menstruating woman,²⁸ the authors of *Zohar*, in conformity with the symbology adopted by other kabbalistic authors of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, associated the blood of menstruation with the demonic potency.²⁹ In one particularly noteworthy passage, having intercourse with a menstruating woman is delineated as one of three acts that drive *Shekhinah* away from the world, the other two being having intercourse with a Christian woman—literally, ‘the daughter of an alien god’ (based on Mal. 2: 11), that is, the god of estrangement or the demonic other side³⁰—and

‘Primitive Hebrew Gospel’; id., *Hebrew Gospel of Matthew*, 206–11; Evans, *Life of Jesus Research*, 287–90; Funkenstein, *Perceptions*, 39; Biale, ‘Counter-History’, 131–5; Chazan, *Fashioning*, 72–6; Horbury, ‘Depiction of Judaeo-Christians’; Limor, ‘Judaism Examines Christianity’, 114–25. On the linkage of Jesus and menstruation, see also *Sefer Nestor ha-Komer*, 7; *Nizzaḥon Vetus*, 43–4, 183–4, 350–4; Talmage, ‘Anti-Christian Polemic’; Lasker, ‘Jewish Philosophical Polemics’, 204; Cuffel, ‘Filthy Words’, 131–6, esp. 133–4. See also Biale, ‘Does Blood’, 18–19. Biale’s comment (p. 23, n. 40) that I have not addressed the ‘gendering of blood in Kabbalah’ does not take into account my study ‘Re/membering’, 216–24, where I frame the Jewish–Christian debate in zoharic literature in precisely these terms. The polemical trope of the impurity of menstruation is used as well by Abraham Abulafia, although he is mostly concerned with emphasizing the material nature of the blood in order to contrast the spirituality of the Jewish messiah (the Sabbath) and the corporeality of Jesus (the sixth day). See Idel, *Studies*, 52–3; Marienberg, *Niddah*, 177, n. 47. On the portrayal of the Christian as a menstruating woman, see also Koren, “‘Woman’”, 284–94. Finally, on the distancing of Mary from the stain of menstruation in Islamic tradition, see Echevarria, *Fortress of Faith*, 149.

²⁸ See Biale, *Women*, 147–74; Cohen, ‘Purity and Piety’; id., ‘Menstruants’; Biale, *Eros*, 55–7. I do not mean to suggest that in the classical rabbinic sources one cannot find a negative depiction of menstruation, ultimately reflecting a misogynist orientation. Consider e.g. *Genesis Rabbah* 17: 8, p. 160, where the laws of menstruation are explained as a punishment for Eve’s having brought about the death of Adam.

²⁹ *Book of the Pomegranate*, 344–5; *Mishkan ha-Edut*, MS Berlin, Staatsbibliothek Or. Quat. 833, fols. 24a–b; and see Tishby, *Wisdom*, 1358–9; Koren, “‘Woman’”, 146–282; id., ‘Kabbalistic Physiology’. If we follow the suggestion of Levine, *In the Presence of the Lord*, 75, that according to the Priestly conception impurity was not only an offence against God but it introduced a ‘kind of demonic contagion into the community’, then the biblical laws regarding menstruation (Lev. 15: 19–33) already presuppose the idea that the blood of menstruation is the materialization of the anti-godly force. For discussion of this position, see also Neusner, *Idea of Purity*, 9–31. On the Priestly notion of the observance of law, especially the sacrificial cult, as the protection of the sacred and elimination of the impure by setting proper boundaries to facilitate the indwelling of the divine glory, see Schwartz, ‘Priestly Account’. It goes without saying that the characterization of menstrual blood as the source of demonic impurity and the ensuing menstrual taboos are found in a variety of different cultures. For representative studies, see Stephens, ‘Cross-Cultural Study’; *Blood Magic*, 3–50; Knight, *Blood Relations*, 374–416; Lupton, *Menstruation*, 92–105. In the Middle Ages this negative conception of the female body led to widely held superstitious beliefs (often presented as scientific in nature) regarding the detrimental effects of the blood of menstruation on a woman’s offspring. See Thomasset, ‘Nature of Woman’, 54–8, 65–6; Elliott, *Spiritual Marriage*, 151 and references cited in n. 62.

³⁰ Cf. *Zohar* 1: 204b, where the ‘alien kingdom’ (*malkhuta aḥra*) of the idolatrous nations is called the ‘other one’ (*aḥer*) based on the verse, ‘For you must not worship any other god,

killing one's own children by aborting a foetus in the womb.³¹ In this context, then, sexual intercourse with a menstruating woman is distinguished from sexual intercourse with a Christian woman, but the two are linked together because both acts involve the insertion of the holy covenant inscribed upon the circumcised penis into an unholy space.³²

As the author of *Tiqqunei Zohar* put it:

He who removes an object from its place and sets it outside its place and its domain, it is as if he uproots the Tree of Life, which is the covenantal sign (*ot berit*), and sets it in a foreign domain (*reshu nukhra'ah*). He who does this causes his soul to be uprooted from its domain, and he puts it in the other domain (*reshu ahra*), which is bile and spleen, and this caused Israel to be uprooted from the land of Israel, and they were exiled in a foreign land, which is public property (*reshut ha-rabbim*).³³

The consequence of the transgressing of boundaries caused by the circumcised male Jew cohabiting with a Gentile woman is a displacement on the psychic and national levels, banishment for the soul and exile for the people of Israel. The concluding image of 'public property' is drawn from the language used halakhically to refer to the domain in which it is forbidden to carry on the Sabbath as opposed to the 'private property' (*reshut ha-yaḥid*). Interpreted kabbalistically, *reshut ha-yaḥid* symbolically denotes *Shekhinah*, the last of the potencies that constitute the world of unity, whereas *reshut ha-rabbim* denotes the feminine force on the side of impurity, the serpent or prostitute, the consort of Samael.³⁴ Interestingly, the former is associated with the righteous (*ṣaddiq*), the force of holiness, or Sabbath (*shabbat*), and the latter with the evil inclination (*yeṣer ha-ra*), the force of impurity, or Saturn

because the Lord, whose name is Impassioned, is an impassioned God' (Exod. 34: 14). And cf. *ibid.* 2: 61*a*, where the same verse is cited as a proof-text to support the view that one should not have sexual intercourse with a Gentile woman, again referred to as the 'daughter of an alien god'. Cf. *ibid.* 1: 131*b*; *Zohar Hadash*, 75*a*, 86*b*. In *Zohar* 3: 111*a* (*Ra'aya Meheimna*), a Jewish man is warned against inseminating either a 'daughter of an alien god' or the 'maidservant' identified further as 'Maḥalat the daughter of Ishmael' (Gen. 28: 9). It is likely that the former refers to a Christian and the latter to a Muslim. See Tishby, *Wisdom*, 1370.

³¹ *Zohar* 2: 3*a*–*b*, translated in Tishby, *Wisdom*, 1202–5. See also Baer, *History*, 1: 262–3.

³² The depiction of circumcision as an impediment to Jewish men from engaging in sexual relations with Gentile women is reflected in the words attributed to the Jew in Abelard, *Dialogue*, 47. The lack of sexual contact between Jewish men and Gentile women is explained either on account of the women detesting the circumcised penis or on account of the Jewish men's desire not to defile 'that member sanctified to the Lord precisely through that sign by which we enter into a covenant with him alone'. The zoharic obsession with defiling the holy sign by engaging in intercourse with a Gentile woman must be seen in the larger medieval polemic context. Glick, *Abraham's Heirs*, 146, suggests that Abelard's inordinate concern with circumcision may have been related to the mutilation of his genitals recounted in *Historia calamitatum*, the 'Tale of Misfortunes'.

³³ *Tiqqunei Zohar*, § 48, 85*a*.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, § 24, 69*a*.

(*shabbetai*). Elsewhere the anonymous kabbalist responsible for this stratum of zoharic literature repeats this theme but connects it more specifically with the exile of the divine presence: ‘He who steals from the covenant and emits semen from it into the foreign domain (*reshu nukhra’ah*), it is as if he went out from the private property (*reshut ha-yahid*) to the public property (*reshut ha-rabbim*), and he causes *Shekhinah* to depart from her place, which is the land of Israel, the private property, and exiles her amongst the nations of the world who are the public property, as it says, “your mother was discharged on account of your transgressions” (Isa. 50: 1).’³⁵

According to the assessment of Baer, the *Zohar* ‘inveighs against lewd practices which were apparently common among the urbane aristocracy of its day’.³⁶ What is important from my perspective is the manner in which that social critique is expressed, for this alone allows one access to the imaginal landscape of the kabbalists who belonged to the mystical brotherhood in Castile. Following the view of a number of medieval halakhic authorities, the zoharic authors maintained that Christianity is idolatry.³⁷ Thus, for example, in one context, from the verse ‘For you must not worship any other god, because the Lord, whose name is Impassioned, is an impassioned God’ (Exod. 34: 14), it is deduced exegetically that he who worships Esau is as if he has worshipped the alien god.³⁸ Insofar as the tannaitic ruling ascribed to idolatry the same status of impurity as menstruation,³⁹ it was an easy step for the thirteenth-century kabbalists to equate Christianity and menstruation. Fornication with a Christian woman has the same detrimental effect as sexual intercourse with one’s wife during her menstrual period: the holy covenant is defiled and the offspring of such a union partakes ontologically of the impure spirit.⁴⁰ In gender terms, this defilement can be seen as the feminization of the masculine Jew. Promiscuous sexual behaviour and idolatrous religious practices⁴¹ were

³⁵ Ibid., § 21, 60a. See § 65, 91a.

³⁶ *History*, 1: 262.

³⁷ See Ch. 1, n. 191. For discussion of the opinion of Maimonides regarding this matter, see below, n. 107.

³⁸ *Zohar* 1: 171b. In zoharic texts and related kabbalistic literature, the passionate zeal (*qin’ah*) associated with the God of Israel in Scripture is linked specifically to the divine attribute that corresponds to the phallus. Cf. *ibid.* 1: 66b, 131b; 2: 3b; 3: 190a; *Book of the Pomegranate*, 230.

³⁹ Mishnah, Shabbat 9: 1; Avodah Zarah 3: 6.

⁴⁰ *Zohar* 1: 131b; 2: 87b; Moses de León, *Mishkan ha-Edut*, fols. 26a–27a; *Book of the Pomegranate*, 212–13.

⁴¹ In the different strata of zoharic literature, sexual relations with Gentile women are repeatedly linked with idolatry (understood as the worship of the other god of the demonic realm). See Tishby, *Wisdom*, 1365, 1370–1; Giller, *Enlightened*, 152, n. 102; and other sources mentioned in Wolfson, *Circle*, 140, n. 2. See *Sheqel ha-Qodesh*, 51–2, and *Zohar* 1: 214a, where

thus understood as forms of seduction by the serpentine force of feminine impurity.⁴²

The unholiness of the theological doctrine propounded by the Church is akin to the blood of menstruation, that is, the impure and unmitigated force of judgement. The nexus between Christianity and menstrual impurity is deepened in another passage in *Zohar* that associates the menstruant with magic. According to that text, the rationale for the biblical injunction against physical contact with a menstruant is that during this time the 'spirit of impurity is conjoined to her' and 'she is prone to carry out acts of sorcery more than at other times'.⁴³ In that context, moreover, mention is made of Balaam, the prototype of the Gentile prophet and sorcerer. It is likely that the figure of Balaam is employed by the zoharic authors to represent Jesus,⁴⁴ a point that is suggested by the comparison that is made (based on a midrashic reading of Deut. 34: 10⁴⁵) between Moses and Balaam: just as no prophet exceeded the former with respect to the holy powers, so no prophet exceeded the latter with respect to the unholy powers.⁴⁶ The linkage of Jesus (or Christianity more generally) and magical practices is a well-attested

sexual intercourse with a non-Jew is considered a world-destroying act. The comparison of the sexual practices of Sephardic Jewish men with Gentile women to idolatry is found in the halakhic compendium written in the first half of the thirteenth century by Moses of Coucy, *Sefer Mišvot ha-Gadol*, prohibition 112, no. 3, cited by Gampel, 'Letter', 397. It is of interest to consider the linkage of the sign of circumcision and idolatry on the part of Gentile women according to the remark placed in the mouth of the Jew in Abelard's *Dialogue*, 47. The correlation of idolatry and menstruation is found already in the pseudepigraphal *Letter of Jeremiah*, but in that context the issue is purely cultic, i.e. since the pagan does not have to abide by the laws of menstruation, the likelihood that sacrifices to idols may have been touched by women during the menstrual period or at childbirth is great. See Neusner, *Idea of Purity*, 36.

⁴² On the feminine nature of the phallic snake and the connection to the symbol of the mother, see Shoham, *Bridge to Nothingness*, 200.

⁴³ *Zohar* 1: 126b. Cf. 3: 79a–b; *Zohar Ḥadash*, 81b–c; *Book of the Pomegranate*, 279–80.

⁴⁴ On the possibility of this identification in earlier rabbinic sources, see Herford, *Christianity*, 64–78. See also the brief comments by Ginzberg, *Genizah Studies*, 325. For a different perspective, see Urbach, 'Rabbinic Homilies', 281–4.

⁴⁵ For references, see Ch. 1, n. 112. The comparison of Moses and Balaam may have been enhanced as well by the widespread depiction of the former as adroit in the wisdom of magic. See Gager, *Moses*, 134–61.

⁴⁶ See *Zohar* 2: 21b–22a, 69b; 3: 192a, 193b–194a; *Zohar Ḥadash*, 47c; Moses de León, *She'elot u-Teshuvot*, 74–5; *Sheqel ha-Qodesh*, 15; Matt, *Zohar*, 240. The association of Balaam's magical acts and the demonic is repeated on many occasions in zoharic literature; cf. *Zohar* 1: 125b–126a; 3: 113a, 200b, 206b–210b, 264a; *Zohar Ḥadash*, 47c; Cohen-Alloro, *Secret of the Garment*, 75–81. In the first and last two of the zoharic references, Balaam is described as drawing down the force of impurity from the supernal serpent by committing sexual acts with his female ass every night, an idea already expressed in rabbinic sources. Cf. Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 105a–b (in that setting, the view that Balaam had intercourse with his she-ass is juxtaposed to the idea that he performed sorcery with his penis) and Avodah Zarah 4b; see also *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*, 187–8 (ad Num. 22: 30). On the prohibition of copulating with an animal, which entails entering the phallus in a place of impurity, see Recanati, *Perush al ha-Torah*, 48a. It

polemical motif,⁴⁷ and it seems that the zoharic authorship is continuing this long-standing tradition in the representation of Jesus (in the guise of Balaam) as the chief wizard of satanic power.⁴⁸ The spiritual force of the Christian faith is magic, which is correlated with the impurity of menstruation. Thus, according to another zoharic passage, physical contact with the menstruant causes a blemish above, for by this action one arouses the 'potent serpent' (*ḥivya taqqifa*) that casts its filth upon *Shekhinah* and thereby separates the masculine and feminine potencies in the Godhead. Sexual relations with a menstruant is a re-enactment of the primordial sin in which the serpent inseminated Eve, an action below that corresponds to the defilement of *Shekhinah* above by the demonic power, a point related to the verse, 'for he has defiled the Lord's sanctuary' (Num. 19: 20).⁴⁹ Underlying the symbolic discourse, however, is an important assumption on the part of the authors of *Zohar* regarding the historical process. Insofar as the image of the serpent is associated with Esau, it follows that when a male Jew cohabits with a menstruating woman, he causes the supernal force of Esau to have dominion over *Shekhinah*. This particular textual example illustrates a larger point: the polemic with Christianity is cast specifically in terms of the issues of gender,

is of interest to note here the anecdote reported in the name of one of the masters of the teaching (*ba'alei ha-torah*) by Lavi, *Ketem Paz*, 2: 282b, concerning the Muslim magician who revealed that he derived his occult power from lying with his she-ass. This passage is cited by Huss, *Sockets*, 213. On the connection between Balaam's sorcery and his engaging in sexual intercourse with his donkey, see *Sheqel ha-Qodesh*, 14–15, and Gikatilla, *Secret of the Snake*, 3. Perhaps in the original rabbinic tradition is a polemic against Christians who are depicted as a race of asses, an image that is especially related to the issue of sexual promiscuity. See Rousselle, *Porneia*, 117–18. Related to this polemical motif is the reference to Peter the ass, which is based on the words *peter ḥamor*, the 'firstling ass' (Exod. 13: 13), in medieval sources. See *Nizzahon Vetus*, 152 and other references cited on p. 302. It should also be recalled that in Late Antiquity the God of the Jews was identified as a donkey or donkey-headed figure. Regarding this tradition, see Smith, *Jesus as Magician*, 62. On the inherent impurity of Balaam, again linked to the image of the serpent, cf. *Zohar* 1: 169b (in that passage Balaam is contrasted with Jacob). On the symbolic representation of the masculine and feminine potencies in the demonic realm respectively as *ḥamor* and *aton*, cf. *Zohar* 3: 207a; *Zohar Ḥadash*, 78c. See below, n. 74. Finally, it is of interest to note the interpretation of Balaam's prophecy in *Mirror of Salvation*, 90, as predicting the birth of Jesus to the Virgin Mary. Just as Balaam transformed the curse into blessing, so Mary is the Second Eve who atones for the original sin of the first woman seduced by the serpent.

⁴⁷ See Ch. 1, n. 112. On the association of Christianity and magical practices, see *Rabbenu Bahya: Be'ur al ha-Torah*, 2: 231 (ad Exod. 22: 17). See the association of magic and Jesus in Abulafia, *Maftaḥ ha-Ḥokhmot*, 64–5. In that context, Abulafia also employs the numerical equivalence of *naḥash* and *mashiah*, the serpent and the messiah. See below, n. 53.

⁴⁸ In *Zohar* 3: 63b Balaam is associated with the scapegoat set aside for Azazel and dispatched into the desert bearing the iniquities of Israel on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16: 21–2). The scapegoat, according to the zoharic symbolism, is the demonic potency also connected to Edom or Samael.

⁴⁹ *Zohar* 3: 79a. The different symbolic connotations of the mythical image of the serpent inseminating Eve in zoharic texts have been duly noted by Tishby, *Wisdom*, 461, 467–70.

sexuality, and embodiment.⁵⁰ Reversing the prevailing demonization of women and Jews in medieval Christendom,⁵¹ the kabbalists of the zoharic circle link the feminine as the sensual and malicious figure to Christians.

The demonic depiction of Christianity is reinforced by the zoharic appropriation of the aggadic motif that Samael is the guardian angel of Esau or Edom.⁵² A striking example of this orientation is found in the zoharic reflections on the description in Genesis 25: 22–6 of the gestation and birth of Esau and Jacob. The prenatal struggle of the twins in the womb is explained ontologically: Esau is the ‘aspect that rides the serpent’,⁵³ an expression that

⁵⁰ This is, of course, not exclusive to *Zohar*. Consider e.g. the reference in medieval Jewish texts to the promiscuous nature of the mother of Jesus cited by Berger, *Nizzahon Vetus*, 23. The discrediting of the sexual behaviour of the father of Jesus figures prominently in the polemical *Toldot Yeshu*; see Blumenkranz, ‘Roman Church’, 221. The assault on the parentage of Jesus may have been contemporary with his life. See *Gospel of Thomas*, § 105, p. 63: ‘Jesus said, Whoever knows the father and the mother will be called the child of a whore.’ Consider also the claim of the Jew reported in Origen, *Contra Celsum*, I. 28, 32 (pp. 28 and 31–2), that the mother of Jesus was convicted of adultery with a soldier named Panthera (the term used in a derogatory sense to refer to the father of Jesus in rabbinic sources; see Chadwick, *ibid.* 31, n. 3; Smith, *Jesus the Magician*, 46–50). This tradition may also underlie the response of the Jews to Jesus in John 8: 41: ‘We were not born of fornication; we have one Father, even God.’ These last two references are noted by Meyer, *Gospel of Thomas*, 106. It is of relevance here to recall as well the argument of Smith, *Jesus the Magician*, 26, that the reference to Jesus as the ‘son of Mary’ in Mark 6: 3 should be understood in a pejorative sense as a challenge to the father of Jesus. Smith supports his reading by noting that the genealogy of Jesus in Matt. 1: 2–16 only mentions four women, all of whom gave birth as a result of illicit sexual relations. The claim that Christians were lax with regard to sexual prohibitions is a common motif in medieval Jewish polemical literature. See e.g. *Book of the Covenant*, 33, 35, 48; *Nizzahon Vetus*, 224 (in that context the Gentile practice of having sexual relations with menstruating women is mentioned explicitly); and cf. the passage from Meir ben Simeon’s *Millhemet Mišwah*, cited by Chazan, *Daggers*, 63. On the use of sexuality as a polemical stratagem employed by medieval Jews against Christians, see Gutwirth, ‘Gender’, 266–9. On the role of gender in the campaign of clerical authorities against dualist heretics in Languedoc, see Lipton, “‘Tanquam effeminatum’”.

⁵¹ Gregg, *Devils, Women, and Jews*.

⁵² *Midrash Tanhuma*, Wayyishlah, 8; *Zohar* 1: 146a, 170a; 2: 11a, 111a, 163b; 3: 124a (*Ra’aya Meheimna*), 199b, 243a (*Ra’aya Meheimna*), 246b (*Ra’aya Meheimna*), 248a (*Ra’aya Meheimna*); *Zohar Hadash*, 23d (*Midrash ha-Ne’elam*), 47a (*Midrash ha-Ne’elam*); *Tiqqunei Zohar*, § 69, 105a; Tishby, *Wisdom*, 464.

⁵³ The expression, *derakhiv nahash*, ‘one who rides a serpent’, is applied to Esau in *Zohar* 1: 171a. In that context, the Aramaic equivalent, *derakhiv al hivya*, is also employed. See 1: 146a, 228a; 2: 268b. On the symbolic association of the serpent with Ishmael and Samael with Edom (concerning the latter, see references in n. 6) in the *Ra’aya Meheimna* stratum of the zoharic corpus, see Ch. 1, n. 422. The depiction of Ishmael (i.e. Islam) as a serpent influenced Sabbatai Ševi’s identification as the ‘holy serpent’. See Scholem, *Sabbatai Ševi*, 227, 235–6, 391, 813. On the numerological equivalence of *nahash* and *mashiah*, noted by Scholem, see also Liebes, *On Sabbateanism*, 172–82. Finally, it is of interest to consider a remark of Luzzatto in *Qin’at ha-Shem Ševa’ot*, 106. Luzzatto states that it appears from a passage in *Zohar* 3: 282a (*Ra’aya Meheimna*) that ‘the messiah, who is in the secret of *Shekhinah*, must be clothed in the shell that

calls to mind the aggadic image of Samael riding upon the serpent that appeared in the shape of a camel,⁵⁴ and Jacob is the ‘aspect that sits upon the holy and perfect throne in the aspect of the sun that cohabits with the moon’.⁵⁵ Esau is the male demonic power (Samael) united with the female serpent in a way that parallels Jacob’s unification with the throne, which is the symbolic depiction of the unity of the masculine *Tiferet* and the feminine *Malkhut*, also represented by the sun and the moon. In the continuation of the passage, Esau is identified more specifically with the evil serpent (*hivya bisha*), the most cunning of all beasts.⁵⁶ The vexing exegetical problem of Jacob’s apparent deceptiveness with respect to purchasing the birthright from Esau, a point exploited polemically by medieval Christian exegetes and homilists against Jews,⁵⁷ is explained in *Zohar* in terms of these ontological correspondences: in order to keep the demonic power of the serpent apart from the side of holiness, it was necessary for Jacob to act deceptively.⁵⁸ ‘Thus, all the actions of Jacob, who is in the secret of faith, with respect to Esau were not to give a place to that serpent to desecrate the sanctuary, not to come close to it, and not to rule in the world.’⁵⁹

is in the secret of Shabbetai, which is the shell of Ishmael in the secret of the diminution of the moon’. Cf. *ibid.* 112–13. This is an obvious reference to the central tenet of Sabbatian ideology regarding the messianic identity of Sabbatai Ševi, who wore the garment of Islam, an interpretation that Luzzatto summarily rejects. See Tishby, *Studies*, 3: 756–79, esp. 759–69.

⁵⁴ *Pirqei Rabbi Eli’ezer*, ch. 13, 31b; *Book Bahir*, § 141, p. 225; *Zohar* 1: 35b, 55a, 263b; 2: 236a–b, 243a, 243b–244a, 268b; Tishby, *Wisdom*, 467. The characterization of the primordial serpent in the form of a camel is made explicitly in a tradition attributed to Simeon ben Eleazar in *Genesis Rabbah* 19: 1, p. 171.

⁵⁵ *Zohar* 1: 137b–138a. Cf. 3: 64a.

⁵⁶ The identification of Esau, demonic impurity, and the serpent is implied as well in *Zohar* 1: 177a.

⁵⁷ See e.g. *Nizzahon Vetus*, 56.

⁵⁸ An entirely different approach is offered in *Zohar* 2: 12b. Building on a view expressed in *Seder Eliyahu Rabbah* 19, p. 114, the author of the zoharic passage explains the domination of Edom in this exile over Israel as compensation for the tears that Esau shed when Jacob took the blessing of the firstborn away from him: ‘The redemption of Israel only depends on weeping, when the tears that Esau wept before his father will be completed and consummated... The weeping that Esau wept and the tears that he shed have brought Israel into exile. When these tears are annulled by the weeping of Israel, they will come out of exile.’ See Tishby, *Wisdom*, 1514–15, and Scholem, *Messianic Idea*, 34. Cf. *Zohar Hadash 23b* (*Midrash ha-Ne’elam*): ‘You should know that since Jacob took the blessings from Esau through deception, permission was not given to any nation in the world to subjugate Israel except for the nation of Esau.’

⁵⁹ *Zohar* 1: 138b. Cf. 143a, 145b–146a; and parallel in Moses de León, *She’elot u-Teshuvot*, 45–6. The zoharic view of keeping the serpent outside the inner sanctum should be compared to the idea expressed by Gikatilla in his *Sod ha-Nahash u-Mishpaṭo*, translated and analysed by Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape*, 79–80; the relevant part of the Hebrew text is printed in *id.*,

The cunningness of Jacob, therefore, is justified by its theological significance: to keep the realms of the demonic and holy separate. From another passage in *Zohar*, it is evident that this act has a redemptive quality; indeed, Jacob is portrayed as rectifying the sin of Adam and Eve brought about through Samael and the serpent. Presented with two explanations of the serpent in the biblical narrative—the view of R. Isaac that the serpent refers symbolically to the evil inclination (*da yešer ha-ra*) and the view of R. Judah that it is verily a serpent (*naḥash mammash*)⁶⁰—Simeon ben Yoḥai asserts that both explanations are correct. Appropriating the aggadic motif briefly mentioned above, the author of the zoharic text claims that Samael appeared on the serpent, which is the image of Satan. Samael's destruction of the 'primordial tree' that God created, which resulted in bringing death to the world, was not rectified until Jacob, identified symbolically as the 'holy tree' (*ilana qaddisha*) and as the 'form of Adam' (*duḡma de-adam*),⁶¹ came and took the blessings from Esau so that neither Samael above nor his likeness below would be blessed. The soteriological justification for Jacob's action is thus based on the legal principle of measure for measure: just as Samael prevented the blessings from the primordial tree, so Jacob blocked the blessings from Esau.⁶² In another passage, the biblical narrative is again contextualized in terms of the conflict between Judaism and Christianity, but in that

Major Trends, 405–6, n. 113. According to that text as well, evil results from the disruption of proper boundaries when the serpent, which belongs on the outside, penetrates to the inside, which is the precinct of the holy. See Gikatilla, *Sha'arei Orah*, 1: 101–2, 135, 154, 211–14; 2: 25, 127. Although the language of *Zohar* tends to be more dualistic (as Scholem himself notes, *On the Mystical Shape*, 81; id., *Major Trends*, 239; see also the introduction of Ben-Shlomo to his edition of *Sha'arei Orah*, 38–9), there is an important similarity between the zoharic treatment of Esau as the evil serpent and Gikatilla's depiction of the primordial serpent, which he identifies as Amaleq.

⁶⁰ In the early version of this analysis, which appeared in Wolfson, 'Re/membering', 219, I rendered the zoharic expression attributed to R. Judah, *naḥash mammash*, as 'literally a serpent'. After having taught the text in a recent graduate seminar on 'Jewish Representations of Christianity' in the Skirball Department of Hebrew and Judaic Studies at New York University, Spring 2005, my student Yaron Milgrom-Elcott suggested, on the basis of my own claim that *mammash* in zoharic literature is a hermeneutical signpost to mark a hyperliteral reading, that the biblical expression should be read as a symbolic reference to a reality above. I have accepted his suggestion as it does seem to me now that Simeon ben Yoḥai's remark that the opinions of both R. Isaac and R. Judah are right is meant to convey the idea that the evil inclination is the psychological counterpart to the demonic potency, and thus both meanings are conveyed by the image of the serpent. On the technical use of *mammash*, see Wolfson, 'Beautiful Maiden', 175–8.

⁶¹ For a useful study to understand the range of philological meanings attached to this technical term in medieval biblical exegesis, see Kamin, *Jews and Christians*, 13–30. On the use of the term in *Zohar*, see Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, 38.

⁶² *Zohar* 1: 35b. The transaction between Jacob and Esau is understood in the main body of *Zohar* to be a particular illustration of the more general principle of the appeasement of the other side through the giving of gifts. See Tishby, *Wisdom*, 453–4.

setting there is an awareness of the historical situation of the Jew vis-à-vis the Christian in the Middle Ages. Jacob may have deceptively appropriated the blessings from Esau, but the descendants of the former were still obeisant to the descendants of the latter. The reader is reassured that the true consequence of Jacob's action will only be disclosed in the messianic future when Israel will be a unified nation in the world and they will rule above and below.⁶³

The portrait of Jacob that may be drawn from this text is that of a second Adam who rectifies the sin of the first Adam brought about by the seduction of Samael and the serpent. Although the zoharic author utilized earlier rabbinic sources to express this notion of Jacob as Adam *redivivus*, including the idea that the beauty of Jacob was like that of Adam,⁶⁴ the approach adopted by him is related more directly to the Pauline typology of Adam and Jesus, which had a great impact on the history of Christian theology.⁶⁵ For Paul, the event of the resurrection of Jesus brings salvation to the world, for through this act of divine grace the punishment of death incurred by humanity as a result of the fall is overcome. Jesus is thus the 'last Adam' who rectifies the sin of the 'first Adam'; through the first Adam, the 'natural body' of creation, all humans are physically born and die, whereas through the final Adam, the 'spiritual body' of the eschaton,⁶⁶ all humans are spiritually reborn and redeemed.⁶⁷ Jesus, the eschatological Adam, is the father of a new humanity 'freed from the tyranny of sin and death', for in him the 'essential

⁶³ *Zohar* 1: 145*b*. In some measure, the approach attested in this passage is reminiscent of Judah Halevi's argument that assigns messianic value to Israel's suffering in the physical world. The torment that the Jews endure at the hands of foreign powers serves as the impetus by which they cultivate the spiritual ideals of humility and submission to God's will. In that respect, the abject existential condition of the Jewish people takes the place of ascetic pietism cultivated by philosophers and mystics. See Lobel, *Between Mysticism and Philosophy*, 52–3.

⁶⁴ Babylonian Talmud, *Baba Meši'a* 84*a*.

⁶⁵ Paul's eschatological anthropology is related to his theology of the covenants: just as the pneumatic Adam fulfills or perfects the somatic Adam, so the new covenant of grace surpasses the old covenant of law. For references, see below, n. 67. The Adam–Jesus typology thus serves a different political agenda than the equation between Jesus and Moses adopted by Jewish-Christians such as the Ebionites. The belief in Jesus as the *novus Moses* was predicated on the recognition that both Church and Synagogue were legitimate paths, and that certain aspects of Jewish ritual had to be upheld even by believers in Christ insofar as Moses was a true and eternal prophet of God. See Schoeps, *Paul*, 245–8. The Jewish-Christian view contrasts sharply with the portrayal of Jesus as superior to Moses in Heb. 3: 1–6, a position also well attested in the history of the Church. Regarding this passage, see Flusser, *Judaism*, 261–8. The sharp distinction between Jesus and Moses underlies the Pauline discussion in Gal. 3–6 of justification by the law versus faith in Christ. See Stanton, 'Law of Moses'.

⁶⁶ The notion of the 'pneumatic body' of Christ of which all believers are members is the theological principle underlying the ethical mandate to glorify the body, which is described as the 'temple of the Holy Spirit' (1 Cor. 6: 15–20). On the transformation of the 'body of humiliation' of sinful humanity into the 'glorious body' of Christ, cf. Phil. 3: 21.

⁶⁷ Rom. 5: 12–21; 1 Cor. 15: 21–2, 45–9; Col. 3: 9–10; see Scroggs, *Last Adam*; Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism*, 36–57, 120, 268, 304; Dunn, *Christology*, 107–13; Segal, *Paul the Convert*,

oneness of humankind' is reconstituted as a 'spiritual community', that is, the Church, which is symbolically depicted as the 'body of Christ'.⁶⁸

For the author of the zoharic homily, it is not Jesus but Jacob who restores the world to its original ontic condition. Moreover, the culpability for the sin is somewhat removed from Adam and placed more squarely on Samael.⁶⁹ The positive valorization of Adam is upheld by the fact that Jacob is depicted as having the form and beauty of Adam. Hence, what Jacob rectifies is not the fallen nature of Adam, but the usurpation of Samael. This is the import of the zoharic statement that the act of destroying the 'primordial tree' (*ilana qadma'ah*), that is, the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, 'was hanging on Samael until another holy tree (*ilana ahra qaddisha*), that is, Jacob, came and took from him the blessings so that Samael above and Esau below would not be blessed'. The seemingly deceitful ruse of Jacob is justified by the fact that it mends the rupture in the cosmic order created by the sinful act of Samael. By linking the satanic force and Esau, the zoharic authorship cleverly undermines the Pauline interpretation of the Genesis narrative: not only is Jesus not the second Adam who restores the pristine divine image to humanity, but the religion of Jesus is the earthly manifestation of the very force that desecrated that image. A further decoding of the kabbalistic symbolism underlying the designation of Jacob as 'another holy tree' brings the anti-Christological polemic into even sharper focus: Jacob symbolizes the attribute of *Tif'eret*, which corresponds to the Tree of Life and the Written Torah. The point of the passage, therefore, is that the way of the law, the Torah, is the antidote to counterbalance the satanic effect of the primordial serpent, identified as Esau, a cipher for Roman Catholicism.

Reversing the Christian myth, Jacob-Israel, and not Jesus, is the Tree of Life that bears the fruit of salvation, which replaces the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge through which sin came into the world.⁷⁰ The eschatological aspiration of the zoharic kabbalists is directed to the overcoming of Esau, the

65–6; Davidsen, 'Structural Typology'; Hofius, 'Adam–Christ Antithesis'. The relation of Jesus to Adam is also presumed in Luke 3: 23–38, which traces the genealogical line from the latter to the former, who is identified as the Son of God. See Fredriksen, *From Jesus to Christ*, 29 and 191.

⁶⁸ Davies, *Jewish and Pauline Studies*, 207–8 and 301. On the image of the 'body of Christ', which is related to the spiritual community of the Church, see 1 Cor. 6: 15, 10: 17, 12: 12–13, 27; Rom. 7: 4, 12: 5; Col. 1: 18, 24.

⁶⁹ One detects a similar homiletical strategy in *Book of the Pomegranate*, 368–9. The attitude expressed in *Zohar* should be viewed within the framework of other medieval Jewish sources that polemicize against the Christian doctrine of original sin. See Rembaum, 'Medieval Jewish Criticism'; Safran, 'Rabbi Azriel and Nahmanides'; Odo of Tournai, *On Original Sin*, 22–9. In other zoharic texts (e.g. *Zohar* 1: 36a), following rabbinic precedent, the blame for the sin in the Garden of Eden is attributed to the female who brought death to the world by cleaving to the demonic realm, which is identified as the 'place of death'.

⁷⁰ See Neumann, *Great Mother*, 253.

earthly manifestation of the demonic other side.⁷¹ This conception of salvation history is exemplified in the following description of the messianic era: 'The Tree of Life will emit the vital force that will never cease, for it has ceased now on account of the fact that the evil serpent rules and the moon is hidden. . . . At that time that evil inclination, which is the evil spirit, will vanish from the world . . . and after it is removed from the world the moon will not be hidden and the wellsprings of the river that flows and issues forth will not cease.'⁷² In this context, attested in other passages as well,⁷³ the Tree of Life symbolizes *Yesod*, which corresponds to the divine phallus, the centre of the creative energy, also depicted by the symbol of the river. In the messianic age the vital force will flow incessantly from this source because the obstructing force of the evil serpent will be obliterated.⁷⁴ This phallic restitution also affects the feminine aspect of the divine, for in the condition of exile the domination of the serpent causes *Shekhinah*, symbolized by the moon, to be concealed. According to another passage, the concealment of the moon is the symbolic import of the scriptural description of the emergence of Jacob from Rebekah's womb holding on to the heel of Esau (Gen. 25: 26).⁷⁵ The (temporarily) subordinate position of Jacob vis-à-vis Esau is related to the scriptural claim that the kings of Edom reigned in the land of Edom before any king reigned over the Israelites (Gen. 36: 31).⁷⁶ In the period of history before the advent of the true messiah, the force of Esau, or Christendom, rules over Israel, and the moon, which is symbolic of *Shekhinah* or the power of Israel, is hidden. But when the efficacy of the demonic serpent is overcome by the rectification of the holy phallus, the 'river that flows and issues forth', the moon will no longer be hidden.⁷⁷ From the point of view of the

⁷¹ Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, 43.

⁷² *Zohar* 1: 130b–131a.

⁷³ In contexts where the symbol of the Tree of Life is used to refer to *Yesod*, the latter is also depicted by the symbol of the incessantly flowing river. The convergence of these two images is obviously meant to underscore the phallic nature of this divine attribute. See *Zohar* 1: 35a; 3: 239b; Moses de León, *Shushan Edut*, 361; id., *Sod Eser Sefirot Belimah*, 381; id., *Sheqel ha-Qodesh*, 69.

⁷⁴ According to *Zohar* 1: 238a, the eschatological promise of Zech. 9: 9 indicates that the messiah will subdue the masculine and feminine powers of the demonic realm, symbolized by the donkey and the she-ass (see above, n. 46). The citation of Isa. 63: 1 in that context alludes to the fact that this process comes about through the execution of divine judgement against the bloody force of Edom. Hence, the messianic king is associated symbolically with *Shekhinah*, which is a manifestation of judgement.

⁷⁵ *Zohar* 1: 138a.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* 1: 108b, 177a–b; 2: 108b, 111a; 3: 128a, 135a, 142a, 292a; Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, 65–7.

⁷⁷ The image of the eclipse of the moon, or the diminution of the light of the moon, for the exile of *Shekhinah*, which reflects her separation from the masculine *Tiferet*, symbolically represented by the sun, is repeated frequently in kabbalistic literature in general and in the

zoharic authorship, the ontological opposition of the two faiths is alluded to in the narrative of creation. The primordial darkness (*ḥoshekh*), associated with the chaos (*tohu*) and symbolized by the shell (*qelippah*) of the nut, is identified as the force whence Edom derives,⁷⁸ whereas Jacob is rooted ontically in the spirit of God (*ruaḥ elohim*), symbolized by the kernel (*moḥa*) of the nut.⁷⁹ According to another passage, Israel is identified as the ‘supernal holy core’ and the idolatrous nations as the shell.⁸⁰ The botanical image of the shell preceding the core is supported exegetically by the verse concerning the rule of the Edomite kings before the kings of Israel.⁸¹ The citation of this verse, moreover, makes it clear that the idolatrous nations refer to Christians. Precisely this symbolism underlies another image employed by Moses de León: the ‘other god’ is the demonic foreskin that surrounds the holy corona of the phallus in the manner that the shell surrounds the core of the nut.⁸² All of these images allude to the mystery that the demonic powers emanate before the holy ones, even though the latter have ontological priority and in the end will prevail.⁸³

As I have noted above, the theological struggle with Christianity is treated in *Zohar* in overtly erotic terms. The key to understanding the meshing of the spiritual and the sexual regarding this matter is the symbol of the serpent. There are passages in *Zohar* wherein the serpent symbolizes the feminine dimension of the demonic, the seductive Lilith who tempts men and appears in the image of a whore. In other contexts the serpent mythically represents the demonic force in general without any gender specification, although in relation to the divine the demonic is gendered as feminine in kabbalistic

zoharic corpus in particular. Conversely, the state of redemption is commonly depicted as the moon being fully illumined by the splendour of the sun. See e.g. *Zohar* 1: 75b, 165a, 181a–b, 199a, 239b; 2: 137a–b, 167b; *Sheqel ha-Qodesh*, 61, 85–6; *Book of the Pomegranate*, 369. According to *Zohar* 1: 20a, the separation of the moon from the sun is described as a diminution of the moon’s light, which results in the creation of shells that protect the kernel, a process that is referred to as the ‘rectification of the kernel’ (*tiqquna de-moḥa*). In this context, then, a positive role is assigned to the shell as a material garment that covers and shields the light.

⁷⁸ On the association of Esau and the primordial darkness, see *Zohar* 2: 167a. Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, 146–9, has argued that the correlation of *tohu* and barrenness in *Zohar* 1: 3b, an ontic condition rectified by the appearance of Abraham, may signify Israel’s exilic condition under the domination of Christianity.

⁷⁹ *Zohar Ḥadash*, 55b. On the use of the image of the shells to characterize the realm of demonic forces, see Tishby, *Wisdom*, 461–4.

⁸⁰ Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, 89, n. 188, surmised that the source for this image was probably Judah Halevi’s *Sefer ha-Kuzari*, IV. 23. On the image of Israel as the core, see *Zohar* 2: 195a.

⁸¹ *Zohar* 2: 108b. See Wolfson, ‘Light’, 82, n. 34.

⁸² *Sheqel ha-Qodesh*, 68–9.

⁸³ Regarding the kabbalistic doctrine of the emergence of the demonic shell prior to the divine core, see Idel, ‘Evil Thought’.

ontology. In other zoharic texts the serpent depicts the demonic male whose phallic drive is directed toward penetrating the sacred space of the divine feminine, *Shekhinah*, an idea that is expressed in terms of the aggadic motif⁸⁴ of the primordial serpent inseminating Eve.⁸⁵ It is evident, as Tishby already noted,⁸⁶ that the serpent, whether male or female, symbolizes the demonic sexual force. What Tishby neglected to mention is the obvious point that the mythical image of the serpent is symbolic of the phallus. But it is precisely this association that allows one to resolve the apparent contradictions in *Zohar* with respect to the gender of the serpent. That is, both on the side of holiness and on the side of impurity the phallus, like the serpent, is androgynous.⁸⁷ However, there is an essential difference between the androgyny of the holy

⁸⁴ For a list of relevant rabbinic sources, see Ginzberg, *Legends*, 5: 133, n. 3, and for the zoharic passages, see Margaliot, *Sha'arei Zohar*, 69, s.v. Shabbat 146a. It is of interest to note that in several contexts (*Zohar* 2: 52b, 219b; 3: 249b) the bite of the 'great serpent' functions in a positive way as the catalyst that opens the womb of the female (portrayed symbolically as a hind based on Ps. 42: 2) to give birth. See Tishby, *Wisdom*, 395–6, 468–9, 738–40. In *Zohar* 3: 67b (*Ra'aya Meheimna*) the image of the serpent opening the womb by biting is applied specifically to the birth of the messiah. This enigmatic image of *Zohar* was considered by later kabbalists to contain one of the most recondite secrets of the divine. Cf. the discussion between Luria and Viṭal regarding *Zohar* 2: 52b in Benayahu, *Toledoth ha-Ari*, 197–8; and see Meroz, 'Redemption', 307–15; Liebes, "'Two Young Roes'", 128–30, 137–48. On the evolution of this secret in Sabbatian literature, see references in *ibid.* 128, n. 146.

⁸⁵ See above, n. 49.

⁸⁶ *Wisdom*, 468.

⁸⁷ I have discussed the mythic symbol of the androgynous phallus in a number of studies. See 'Woman—The Feminine as Other', 186–8; *Through a Speculum*, 275, n. 14, 317, 342, 344, 357–9, 371, n. 155, 388–9; *Circle*, 46–7, 85–92, 117–18, 147–8, n. 42, 198–9, n. 11, 201, n. 29, 202, n. 31, and 224, n. 147; *Along the Path*, 84, 87–8, 173, n. 319, 175, n. 329, 186, n. 376, 222, n. 172. Neumann, *Great Mother*, 49, refers to the 'uroboric nature' of the phallus, a term that he employs to convey the idea that phallic images can be symbolic of both masculine and feminine. Particularly interesting is Neumann's reference (n. 18 *ad loc.*) to the Indian sculpture of the phallus in which Shiva and Shakti are contained. In addition, cf. the description of the uroboric snake woman, i.e. a woman with a phallus, on p. 170. For a more extensive discussion of the mythological symbol of the uroboros, with special attention to its hermaphroditic character, see Neumann, *Origins*, 5–38, 187, 414–18. The image of the uroboros is connected to the demonic power in *Zohar* 2: 176b (*Sifra di-Ṣeni'uta*), as noted by Tishby, *Wisdom*, 467. Moreover, in that context, the serpent, whose tail is said to be on its head rather than in its mouth, is associated with the symbol of the sea-monster (*tannin*). It is also important to note that the particular act that is related to the image of the serpent is the engraving or inscribing of letters. For a later application of the zoharic symbolism, see Nathan of Gaza, *Sefer ha-Beri'ah*, MS New York, Jewish Theological Seminary of America 1581, fols. 6a and 19a. According to Nathan, the lines within *Hokhmah* whence the letters are formed within the womb of *Binah* are identified as serpents. According to other passages in this treatise, the source of the serpents, linked to the demonic shells, is the *tehiru*. See e.g. fol. 9b: 'Know that after the ten *sefirot* of which we have spoken came to be, there remained much in the *tehiru* as we will explain, and from that *tehiru* is the existence of the shells and the serpents, and through this you will understand the matter of the shell preceding the fruit.' For further discussion of this theme, see Scholem, *Sabbatai Ṣevi*, 299–302. The more conventional image of the uroboros, i.e. the circular snake whose tail is in its

phallus (manifest in the ninth and tenth gradations, *Yesod* and *Malkhut*) and that of the demonic phallus (represented by Samael and Lilith). In the case of the former, the female is rooted in the male, whereas in the case of the latter, the male is an aspect of the female. The shift in the gender polarity is underscored in the following zoharic reflection on Jacob's blessing of Joseph's sons:

He began to speak and he said: 'Who are these' (*mi elleh*) (Gen. 48: 8)? One may infer that he was speaking about worship from the side of idolatry [as it says] 'This is your god, O Israel' (*elleh elohekha yisra'el*) (Exod. 32: 4). Rather it is a secret: when all the aspects of that evil serpent, the serpent that comes from the side of the impure spirit, and the one who rides upon it are united, they are called 'these' (*elleh*). . . . The Holy Spirit is called 'this' (*zo't*), and it is the secret of the holy, inscribed covenant that is always found on men.⁸⁸ And this [is the import of] 'This is my God and I will glorify him' (*zeh eli we-anwehu*) (Exod. 15: 3), and 'This is the Lord' (*zeh yhw'h*) (Isa. 25: 9). But these [demonic forces] are called *elleh*, and thus it is written, 'This is your god, O Israel'. And for this reason it is written, 'Though she might forget these' (*gam elleh tishkkaḥnah*), but 'I,' the secret of *anokhi*, 'never could forget you' (*we-anokhi lo eshikkaḥekh*) (Isa. 49: 15).⁸⁹

The androgyne on the demonic side, portrayed by Samael and the serpent upon which he rides, is parallel to the androgyne on the holy side, symbolized by the holy covenant that is inscribed on the phallus. Thus the plural *elleh* connotes the union in the unholy realm that is comparable to the conjunction of *zeh* and *zo't*, which signifies the union in the holy realm. But there is a major difference between the two: the union of the male and the female in the demonic realm results in the manifestation of the latter in the guise of the former, that is, Samael riding upon the serpent is an actualization of the force of judgement, whereas the union in the divine realm is symbolized by the integration of the feminine *Shekhinah*, referred to as the Holy Spirit, into an aspect of the holy covenant. In his marginal notes to a parallel to this passage in another zoharic context,⁹⁰ Ḥayyim Viṭal correctly explained that the statement that the Holy Spirit is in the 'mystery of the holy, inscribed covenant' refers to *aṭarah*, that is, the corona of the phallus. And, indeed,

mouth, appears in *Zohar* 2: 179*a* and 3: 205*b*. These zoharic references are cited by Scholem, *Sabbatai Ševi*, 236, n. 105. Regarding the head and tail of the evil serpent, see *Zohar* 2: 268*b*; 3: 119*b*. In the latter context, *Shekhinah* in exile is described as executing providence over the nations of the world in the manner that the serpent crawls upon the earth, with its head bent to the dust and its tail extended in the air.

⁸⁸ The expression that I have translated as 'men' is *bar nash*, the Aramaic equivalent of *ben adam*. From the context it is evident that this term does not denote all of humanity but is limited to Jewish males, for the inscription of the sign of the covenant is exclusive to the latter.

⁸⁹ *Zohar* 1: 228*a*.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.* 2: 236*b*.

how else could one interpret the zoharic claim? Note that the female aspect of the divine is not depicted here in terms that are generally associated with the feminine gender. On the contrary, *Shekhinah* is identified specifically as part of the *membrum virile*, and precisely in that capacity does she correspond to the serpent upon which Samael rides. The rectification of the sin of the serpent, *tiqqun ha-naḥash*, is through the sign of the covenant, *ot berit*, inscribed on the flesh of the male Jew. The exegesis of Isaiah 49: 15 at the conclusion of the passage is particularly important, for by means of it the zoharic author makes the point that forgetfulness is associated with the demonic powers and removed entirely from *Shekhinah*, for she is the secret of the covenant of circumcision, the locus of corporeal memory.

The theme of circumcision thus plays a crucial part in the zoharic polemic with the thematized portrait of Christianity.⁹¹ In clever exegetical fashion, the authorship of *Zohar* turns the Pauline view regarding circumcision on its head.⁹² Not only is the literal circumcision of the flesh not overcome by spiritual circumcision,⁹³ which was identified with baptism, a re-enactment of the crucifixion of Christ,⁹⁴ but through the physical rite the corporeal is spiritualized and the spiritual corporealized. In the final analysis, circumcision (*milah*) is the true incarnation of the divine word (*millah*) in the flesh. Hence Abraham, and not Jesus, is the creative potency of the divine manifest in the world. The point is enunciated in an interpretation of the verse, ‘The

⁹¹ The issue of circumcision is the subtext of the polemical zoharic passage cited and discussed by Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, 146–52; and see the author’s comments on p. 233, nn. 36 and 42. Kiener, ‘Image of Islam’, 48, 54–60, notes the centrality of the ritual practice of circumcision in the polemic against the Muslim faith that one finds in zoharic literature. Regarding this point, see also Wolfson, ‘Circumcision and the Divine Name’, 98–9; id., *Through a Speculum*, 366, n. 142. The extent to which circumcision was employed in medieval Christian polemic against the Jews is underscored by an idea expressed in a fourteenth-century source from Bohemia that the Antichrist is circumcised in order to conform to Jewish law. See Kestenberg-Gladstein, ‘Eschatological Trends’, 241 and reference given on p. 251, n. 4. It must also be noted that a polemical strategy that Jews employed against Christians was to emphasize the circumcision of Jesus. See e.g. *Divrei Wikkuaḥ mi-tokh Sefer Yosef ha-Meqqane*, 301–2; *Nizzahon Vetus*, 96, 216, 333; *Sefer Nestor ha-Komer*, 7; Lasker and Stroumsa, *Polemic of Nestor the Priest*, 76.

⁹² Many scholars have written on Paul’s treatment of circumcision, debating the question whether he intended to undermine the legitimacy of circumcision altogether or just to introduce a means of justification that would include Gentiles in the covenant of Israel as well. Here I only mention a few relatively recent discussions: Hays, ‘“Have We Found Abraham”’; Collins, ‘Symbol of Otherness’; Segal, *Paul the Convert*, 187–223; Boyarin, *Radical Jew*, 25–7, 36–8, 106–35; Cohen, *Why Aren’t Jewish Women Circumcised?*, 68–73.

⁹³ Rom. 2: 29; Phil. 3: 3. On the identification of circumcision as the mark of Jewish carnality, associated with physical appetites in early Christian writers, see Clark, *Reading Renunciation*, 225–6.

⁹⁴ Here I follow the suggestion of Boyarin, *Radical Jew*, 27, who cites in support of his interpretation Wedderburn, *Baptism and Resurrection*, 84.

blossoms have appeared in the land, the time of pruning⁹⁵ has come, the song of the turtledove is heard in our land' (Song 2: 12), which serves as the proem (*petih̄ta*) to the zoharic exegesis of the epiphany of the three angels to Abraham after his circumcision at the beginning of the section *Wayyera* (Gen. 18).⁹⁶ I translate the part of the text that is most pertinent to the Jewish–Christian polemic:

'The song of the turtledove is heard in the land', this is the word of the holy One, blessed be he, which did not exist in the world until Adam was created. When Adam came into being, everything existed. After Adam sinned, everything departed from the world and the earth was cursed, as it is written, 'Cursed be the earth because of you' (Gen. 3: 17), and it is written, 'If you till the soil, it shall no longer yield its strength to you' (Gen. 4: 12), and it is written, 'Thorns and thistles shall it sprout for you' (Gen. 3: 18). Noah came and he crafted spades and hoes in the world,⁹⁷ and after that [it is written] 'He drank of the wine and became drunk, and he uncovered himself within his tent' (Gen. 9: 21). People of the world came and sinned before the holy One, blessed be he, and the forces of the earth vanished as it was in the beginning. They remained like this until Abraham came, for when Abraham came to the world, immediately 'the blossoms appeared in the land'. All the forces of the earth were rectified and they were revealed. 'The time of pruning has come', [this refers to] the time that the holy One, blessed be he, told him to circumcise himself, for the time had come when the covenant should be found in Abraham and he circumcised himself. Then this verse was fulfilled in him, the world was established, and the word of the holy One, blessed be he, was revealed through him, as it is written, 'The Lord appeared to him' (Gen. 18: 1).⁹⁸

The key to understanding this passage is the manner in which one interprets the expression 'word of the holy One, blessed be he', *millah de-quḏsha berikh*

⁹⁵ The Hebrew *zamir* has a double connotation, 'singing' and 'pruning'. Both meanings are attested in the zoharic text. In this context, the pruning is related more specifically to the rite of circumcision.

⁹⁶ The contextualization of a polemic against Christianity in the zoharic exegesis of Gen. 18 is not accidental, for this verse was used in Christian polemics as a scriptural proof-text to anchor the doctrine of the Trinity in Hebrew Scripture. See e.g. *Book of the Covenant*, 61–4. In the Eastern Orthodox iconographic tradition, especially prominent in Russian Orthodoxy, the appearance of the three angels to Abraham is assumed to be the sensory apparition of the three divine hypostases and is thus known as the 'Old Testament Trinity'. See Ouspensky, *Theology*, 267, 276, 294–6, 398–9, 401–2, 408.

⁹⁷ The presumption of the *Zohar* is an aggadic elaboration of the verse, 'Noah, the tiller of the soil, was the first to plant a vineyard' (Gen. 9: 20), which is followed by the narrative concerning Noah's drunkenness. The idea that Noah was responsible for the introduction of instruments in the world is suggested, no doubt, by the biblical description of him as one who worked the land. The depiction of Noah as a drunkard is related more specifically to the fact that he is described as the first to plant a vineyard.

⁹⁸ *Zohar* 1: 97a–b. My reading of this passage confirms the interpretation of *ibid.* 1: 3b proposed by Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, 146–50.

hu. I suggest that this is not simply a rhetorical trope to allude to the speech of God, but it is rather a technical reference to the hypostatic word of God. The divine word is first manifest in Adam, but it is fully revealed through Abraham after his circumcision. Implicit in this passage is a play on the words *millah*, ‘speech’, and *milah*, ‘circumcision’. The full disclosure of the former is only through the latter. By means of the bodily circumcision, moreover, reality is ontically grounded and the reparation of the primordial sin of Adam and Eve is enacted by the covenant of circumcision performed by Abraham. Although the word was first revealed through Adam, as a consequence of his sin there was a disruption in the cosmic order, mythically portrayed as the cursing of the earth. To understand the nature of that curse, which in turn illuminates the metaphysical nature of sin, it is necessary to decode the remark that as a result of Adam’s sin ‘everything departed from the world’ (*kola isttalaq me-alma*). In order to comprehend that comment, however, it is necessary to ponder the preceding remark, ‘When Adam came into being, everything existed’ (*keiwan de-ishttekakh adam kola ishttekakh*). In the above translation I rendered the word *kola* in these two statements as ‘everything’, but this fails to capture the philological resonance of the original language, for this term alludes to the divine emanation that is ‘the All’ (in Hebrew *ha-kol*), a standard name in the theosophic symbolism (including that of the *Zohar*) for *Yesod*. This designation has an obvious phallic connotation: *Yesod* is called *ha-kol* for it is the gradation that comprises all the other gradations in the same manner that the phallus was thought of as comprehending within itself all the other bodily parts.⁹⁹ Following this line of interpretation, the sin of Adam brought about the removal of the (phallic) All from the earth, which led to the decimation of the latter. Only when Abraham was circumcised, and the word of God was fully manifest in the world through him, did the earth again become productive. By means of circumcision the male channel overflows to and is united with the female ground (*ha-kol ba-kol*), and consequently, the container becomes the contained. The zoharic idea can be viewed as a kabbalistic elaboration of the midrashic notion that God created the world on account of Abraham, an idea based on reading the final word in the expression *elleh toldot ha-shamayim we-ha-areṣ be-hibar’am*, ‘Such is the story of heaven and earth when they were created’ (Gen. 2: 4) as *be-avraham*, that is, by means of Abraham heaven and earth were created.¹⁰⁰ The concluding comment in

⁹⁹ The point is made explicitly in many kabbalistic documents. Here I mention only a few representative examples from the oeuvre of Moses de León: *Sheqel ha-Qodesh*, 61; *Sod Eser Sefirot Belimah*, 381; *Book of the Pomegranate*, 227.

¹⁰⁰ *Genesis Rabbah*, 12: 9, p. 107.

this opening sermon of *Zohar* on Genesis 18: 1 reiterates this very point in slightly different language:

Come and see: when Adam sinned, he sinned with respect to the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, as it is written, ‘but as for the Tree of Knowledge etc.’ (Gen. 2: 17). He sinned with respect to it and he caused death for all human beings of the world. Thus it is written, ‘what if he should stretch out his hand and take also from the Tree of Life and eat, and live forever!’ (Gen. 3: 22). When Abraham came, he rectified the world through the other tree, which is the Tree of Life, and he made known the faith to all people of the world.¹⁰¹

Circumcision thus retains the theological and soteriological significance denied it by Paul; indeed, it is through circumcision of the flesh, and not baptism or the belief in the resurrection, that one truly attains the ‘mystery of faith’ (*sod ha-emunah*).¹⁰² From that perspective it may be said that by means of circumcision Christianity itself is ultimately redeemed. The universalistic element is underscored by the concluding remark (based on the midrashic depiction) that Abraham made known the faith in one God to all the children of the world. The expression used here is *benei alma*, which is certainly not the same as *bar nash*, a classification that is reserved exclusively for the holy seed.¹⁰³ Nevertheless, we must acknowledge that in some measure the zoharic authorship does here affirm a view that bridges the gap separating Jew and Gentile. The kabbalistic interpretation concomitantly rejects and appropriates the standard Christian triumphalist claim regarding the superiority of baptism over circumcision as a means to rectify the primal sin of Adam.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ *Zohar* 1: 102b.

¹⁰² In several contexts, Moses de León describes the rite of circumcision as entering the ‘mystery of faith’. See *Sheqel ha-Qodesh*, 67; ‘Sefer ha-Mishkal’, 133. On the use of the kabbalistic idiom *raz ha-emunah* in the polemical hymn of unity composed by Avigdor Kara, see Gladstein, ‘Eschatological Trends’, 244 and 253, n. 27.

¹⁰³ The term *benei alma* is used frequently in zoharic literature and usually denotes humanity in general. In some contexts, however, it appears to relate to the Jewish people exclusively. See e.g. *Zohar* 1: 83a.

¹⁰⁴ An interpretation of circumcision as the rectification of the primal sin of Adam in terms that are remarkably close to the Christian belief is found in Crescas, *Or ha-Shem*, II. 2.6, 38b–39a. The Christological element is enhanced by the fact that Crescas refers to circumcision as the ‘new covenant’ (*berit hadash*). See Gross, ‘Reasons for the Commandment’, 33–4. For a different approach, see Lasker, ‘Original Sin’, 127–35. It is reasonable to assume that the view of Crescas also reflects the influence of kabbalistic symbolism as Lasker, *ibid.* 130–1, already suggested. The nexus that Crescas draws between circumcision and Torah in *Or ha-Shem*, III. 3.3, 74a, also betrays the impact of kabbalah upon his thought. Regarding this relationship, see Harvey, ‘Kabbalistic Elements’.

ISHMAEL: ALIENATION OF THE SAME

As I have already indicated, from the vantage-point of the zoharic authorship for the most part (and this excludes the *Ra'aya Meheimna* and *Tiqqunei Zohar* strata), Edom presented a far greater challenge to Israel than did Ishmael. On the whole, what one finds in *Zohar* is confirmation of the conclusion reached by a variety of social historians, typified by the observation of Mark Cohen: 'When all is said and done, however, the historical evidence indicates that the Jews of Islam, especially through the formative and classical centuries (up to the thirteenth century), experienced much less persecution than did the Jews of Christendom.'¹⁰⁵ Although members of the zoharic circle apparently all lived in towns in northern Spain well after the reconquest, the more positively disposed attitude towards Islam found in the main body of *Zohar* is based firmly on ideational grounds that fostered what is often referred to as the Jewish–Muslim symbiosis or the even more daring notion of an interconfessional or transconfessional wisdom based on universal truths.¹⁰⁶ Here one would do well to recall the opinion expressed by Maimonides that, halakhically, Christianity, in contrast to Islam, is considered to be idolatry.¹⁰⁷ The religion of Islam is intimately closer to the monotheistic core of Judaism. Moreover, Maimonides ruled that the circumcision of the Ishmaelite, also the seed of Abraham, ideally should occur on the eighth day,¹⁰⁸ a ruling that potentially would have neutralized one of the major differences between

¹⁰⁵ Cohen, *Under Crescent and Cross*, p. xix. See id., 'Anti-Jewish Violence'.

¹⁰⁶ Wasserstrom, 'Jewish Muslim Relations'. On inter-faith dialogue between Muslim and Jew, see also Glick, "'My Master, the Jew'". The spiritual and cultural proximity of Judaism and Islam in the Middle Ages should not blind one to claims for the abrogation of the Mosaic law on the part of Muslim thinkers. See Adang, *Muslim Writers*, 192–222.

¹⁰⁷ Maimonides, *Mishnah im Perush Rabbenu Mosheh ben Maimon: Seder Nezikin*, ed. Kafih, Avodah Zarah 1: 3, p. 225. On the characterization of the Church as a 'house of idolatry', see *ibid.* 1: 4, p. 226. The halakhic ruling regarding the idolatrous status of Christianity is repeated by Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Avodat Kokhavim 9: 4 (the better reading of this passage is cited by Kafih, p. 225, n. 10). On the non-idolatrous status of Islam in contrast to Christianity, see *Mishneh Torah*, Ma'akhalot Asurot 11: 7; letter of Maimonides to Obadiah the Convert in *Iggerot ha-Rambam*, 1: 238–9. Wolfson, *Studies*, 2: 453, argued that the characterization of Christians as idolaters in Maimonides reflected the 'common Muslim charge of polytheism against Christianity'. For discussion of the Maimonidean position, see also Kreisel, *Maimonides' Political Thought*, 39–40, 284, n. 70; Bleich, 'Divine Unity', 237–40. On the ascription of idolatrous elements to both Christianity and Islam, see Judah Halevi, *Sefer ha-Kuzari*, IV. 11, and discussion in Lasker, 'Proselyte Judaism', 83.

¹⁰⁸ In *Guide* III. 49, Maimonides emphasizes that the perfection of the rite of circumcision depends on its being performed in childhood, which may in fact be a tacit critique of the Muslim practice of deferring circumcision until the male child reaches puberty.

Jewish and Muslim rites of circumcision.¹⁰⁹ On the other hand, Maimonides ruled that it was permissible to teach Christians about the commandments in order to draw them closer to the true religion of Israel, but it was not permissible to do so with Muslims since they do not accept the divine origin of Hebrew Scripture.¹¹⁰ That the ruling of Maimonides carries an implicit messianic aspiration is evident from his remark that the ‘uncircumcised believe in the immutability of the text of the Torah and if one can establish for them the correct interpretation, it is possible that they may return to what is good, and even if they do not return, when they desire to return an obstacle will not come upon us, for in their Scripture one will not find something different from our Scripture’.¹¹¹ The ‘return to what is good’ is reminiscent of the remark of Maimonides in the *Mishneh Torah* that in the days of the messiah everyone—that is, Jews and Gentiles—‘will return to the true law’ (*dat ha-emet*).¹¹² In spite of these occasional discrepancies, Maimonides portrayed Islam as being far more concordant with Judaism on theological grounds than Christianity. Although the Castilian kabbalists responsible for the bulk of zoharic literature did not accept Maimonides’s position without qualification, it is important to note that in general terms the attitude towards Islam does reflect something of the Maimonidean perspective. The contextualization of Islam within the structure of the divine hypostases, which relates specifically to circumcision, is a theosophic confirmation of Maimonides’s halakhic ruling that Islam is not an idolatrous religion. Conversely, the unqualified demonization of Christianity (based on the negative valorization of the foreskin) reflects the decision regarding the essentially idolatrous nature of this faith.

¹⁰⁹ *Mishneh Torah*, Melakhim 10:8. See Novak, ‘Treatment of Islam’, 240–3; Kasher, ‘Maimonides’ View of Circumcision’. In his commentary on Ḥayy Ibn Yaqzan, Moses Narboni elaborates the position of Maimonides by combining his depiction of Islam as non-idolatrous with his explanation of circumcision as an affirmation of God’s unity, which Narboni applies to Islam as well as Judaism. See Holzman, ‘R. Moses Narboni’. An allusion to Muslim circumcision may be detected in Judah Halevi, *Sefer ha-Kuzari*, III. 8, where reference is made to every ‘other nation’ that attempts to imitate the Jewish rite. See Lasker, ‘Proselyte Judaism’, 78–9, 84.

¹¹⁰ *Teshuvot ha-Rambam*, 1: 284–5 (no. 149). In part, the ruling of Maimonides is based on rabbinic dicta that explicitly state that Torah is not the exclusive possession of the Jews. See Bloch, *Israel and the Nations*, 3. On the importance of this ruling in the ostensibly more positive attitude toward Christianity in contrast to Islam on the part of Maimonides, see Novak, ‘Maimonides on Judaism’. Novak cites and discusses the relevant responsum of Maimonides, *ibid.* 5–6. See also Schlossberg, ‘Attitude of Maimonides’.

¹¹¹ *Teshuvot ha-Rambam*, 1: 285.

¹¹² *Mishneh Torah*, Melakhim 12: 1. According to the uncensored version of the eleventh chapter of this section of the *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides assigned a messianic role to both Christianity and Islam in terms of preparing the world for true monotheism. The relevant text is cited and analysed in Novak, ‘Maimonides on Judaism’, 7–8. See also Kellner, *Maimonides on Judaism*, 33–47.

Notwithstanding the relatively positive theological assessment of Islam, in political terms Maimonides had quite a different perspective. Having been forced to flee his native Spain on account of the tyranny wrought by the Muslim Almohads in Spain in the twelfth century, and to sojourn in Morocco and Palestine before settling in Egypt, one can well understand the acrimonious tone of Maimonides's remark of consolation in his epistle to the Jews of Yemen:

You know, my brethren, that on account of our abundant sins God has cast us into the midst of this people, the nation of Ishmael, who augment our travails, and who bring forth injunctions from their faith to harm us and to debase us, in the manner that the exalted one had warned us: 'Even our enemies themselves being judges' (Deut. 32: 31). No nation has ever done more harm to Israel, and none has matched it in debasing and humiliating us, and in maintaining our hatred like them.¹¹³

The harsh depiction of Islam has its parallel in kabbalistic literature, including zoharic material. It has been argued that by the end of the thirteenth century, in the wake of the Almohad persecution, an anti-Ishmaelite sentiment begins to take root in the Spanish kabbalah.¹¹⁴ This feeling is epitomized in the statement found in Baḥya ben Asher's commentary to the verse, 'The Lord your God will inflict all those curses upon the enemies and foes who persecuted you' (Deut. 30: 7):

He begins with the 'enemies' in order to juxtapose the pursuit to the enemies, which refers to the children of Esau, for the essence of our exile in every place is with regard to the children of Esau. They are called 'your enemies', as it is written, 'I have hated Esau' (Mal. 1: 3). And thus they said in *Midrash Mishlei*,¹¹⁵ 'A slave-girl who supplants her mistress' (Prov. 30: 23), this refers to Esau, as it is said, 'I have hated Esau'. 'A slave-girl supplants her mistress', this refers to Ishmael who came from Hagar, for the sons of Ishmael are harsher on Israel than the sons of Esau. Therefore the verse refers to them as 'your enemies'. Thus they said, 'better under Edom than under Ishmael'.¹¹⁶

In blatant contradiction to the talmudic dictum, 'better under Ishmael and not under a foreign people' (*taḥat yishma'el we-lo taḥat nokhri*),¹¹⁷ Baḥya cites an older (and, as of yet, unidentified) source to the effect that it is better to be

¹¹³ *Iggerot ha-Rambam*, 1: 160.

¹¹⁴ Septimus, "Better Under Edom".

¹¹⁵ The precise wording of Baḥya is not found in the extant version of the midrashic source he cites, but there is certainly an allusion to the point he elicits from this text. See *Midrash Mishle*, 30, pp. 185–6.

¹¹⁶ *Rabbenu Baḥya: Be'ur al ha-Torah*, 3: 439–40. On the overpowering capacity of Islam, whose strength in the end will turn to weakness, see Baḥya's commentary on Gen. 17: 20, in *Rabbenu Baḥya: Be'ur al ha-Torah*, 1: 163.

¹¹⁷ Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 11a. For the evolution of this talmudic dictum into the saying cited by Baḥya, see Septimus, "Better Under Edom"; 104–5.

under the rule of Christianity than that of Islam (*taḥat edom we-lo taḥat yishma'el*). This is a somewhat unexpected turnaround given the general attitude regarding the far more volatile and precarious situation of Jews living under Christian rule in the Middle Ages. Interestingly, a similar sentiment is expressed in the following passage in *Zohar*:

R. Judah began to expound: 'The earth shudders at three things [at four which it cannot bear]: A slave who becomes king' (Prov. 30: 21–2). It has been taught: There is no nation as loathed, cursed, or despised before the holy One, blessed be he, like the Egyptians. The holy One, blessed be he, gives them dominion on account of Israel. 'A slave-girl who supplants her mistress' (Prov. 30: 23), this refers to Hagar who gave birth to Ishmael. He did several evil things to Israel, he ruled over them, and afflicted them with all kinds of affliction, and he decreed several persecutions over them. Until this very day they rule over them and they do not allow them to subsist in their religion. There is no exile more difficult for Israel like the exile of Ishmael.¹¹⁸

It is likely that the concluding remark, which appears in Hebrew in the original, is a later addition to the text.¹¹⁹ Even so, it is fairly obvious that the portrayal of Islam in the rest of this passage (whose authenticity is not in question) is negative. Along similar lines, in an apocalyptic passage included in *Zohar*, the final battle at the end of this historical epoch is described as Israel overcoming the force of Ishmael, who currently rules over the land of Israel as a partial reward for adopting the ritual of circumcision in an imperfect form.¹²⁰ In some passages Ishmael is depicted in explicitly demonic terms.¹²¹ The characterization of Islam as intrinsically impure is implied, for instance, in the statement that 'until Abraham was circumcised his seed was not holy since it came forth from the foreskin and it was conjoined to the foreskin below'.¹²² The difference in the birth of Abraham's two sons is set into sharp relief: Isaac was conceived after the circumcision and is thus truly a product of the holy seed, whereas Ishmael is from the realm of impurity.¹²³ According to another passage, the 'other gods' (*elohim aḥerim*), which derive from the dregs of the

¹¹⁸ *Zohar* 2: 17a.

¹¹⁹ As suggested by Reuven Margalioṭ in his annotations, *Nišoṣei Zohar*, to his edition of *Zohar* 2: 17a, n. 2.

¹²⁰ *Zohar* 2: 32a. A veiled allusion to this theme may be found in 1: 83a, wherein the possession of the land of Israel by the Canaanites is explained in terms of Abraham's descent into the demonic realm of Egypt, which provides the esoteric significance of the biblical narrative concerning the enslavement of the Israelites. Later authors, e.g. Abraham Saba, repeat the zoharic view. See Walfish, *Esther*, 139.

¹²¹ *Zohar* 1: 118b; *Zohar Ḥadash*, 47a.

¹²² *Zohar* 1: 103b. Cf. parallel in the text of de León's '*Sefer ha-Mishkal*', 131–2, and see Naḥmanides, *Perush ha-Ramban al ha-Torah*, 1: 100 (ad Gen. 17: 4), 'He commanded Abraham to enter into his covenant, to be circumcised before Sarah became pregnant, so his progeny would be holy.'

¹²³ *Zohar* 1: 110a.

Jewish demons (*shedim yehuda'in*), comprise both Ishmael and Esau. Even in this context, however, a greater antipathy is shown with respect to Esau. Thus, the zoharic authorship predicts that in the future the god of the sons of Esau shall bow down to the Jews who worship the true God.¹²⁴

The depiction of Islam as a demonic force is affirmed in another passage where Ishmael is associated with idolatry in a manner that conflicts with other zoharic texts that assign a liminal status to Islam situated between the divine and demonic, in contrast to the unambiguous holiness of Israel on the one side and the unambiguous impurity of Esau on the other. The relevant homily begins with the following interpretation of 'Sarah saw the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham playing' (Gen. 21: 9) attributed to R. Ḥiyya: 'From the day Isaac was born and Ishmael was in the house of Abraham Ishmael was not mentioned by name; in the place that gold is found the dregs are not mentioned before it. Thus it says 'the son of Hagar the Egyptian', a man that is worthy of being mentioned before Isaac.'¹²⁵ According to this exegesis, Isaac the son of Sarah is aligned with gold and Ishmael the son of Hagar with the dregs of gold, that is, the former symbolizes the attribute of fear or judgement and the latter the demonic potency. The association of Ishmael with the demonic is enhanced by the zoharic appropriation of an earlier midrashic explanation of the 'playing' mentioned at the end of the verse as a reference to idolatry.¹²⁶ From the kabbalistic standpoint, as I noted in the previous chapter, idolatry is the spiritual force of the demonic that stands in opposition to the true faith, which is the corresponding force on the side of the divine. Thus, the zoharic homily continues:

Since she saw him [involved] in idolatry and his mother taught him the laws of idolatry, Sarah said "for the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance" (Gen. 21: 10), I know that he will never inherit the portion of faith and he will not have a portion with my son not in this world and not in the world to come', and thus the holy One, blessed be he, acquiesced to her. The holy One, blessed be he, wanted to set aside the holy seed on its own as is appropriate, for this reason he created the world, because Israel arose in the will of the holy One, blessed be he, before the world was created.

The overtly disparaging characterization of Ishmael in this passage is generally not the position adopted by the authors of the central body of *Zohar* in contrast to the author of *Ra'aya Meheimna* and *Tiqunei Zohar*. In the latter strata of the zoharic corpus Ishmael and Edom are identified more consistently as two demonic forces, the former represented in the image of the

¹²⁴ *Zohar Ḥadash*, 78d.

¹²⁵ *Zohar* 1: 118b.

¹²⁶ *Genesis Rabbah*, 53: 11, p. 568. See *Zohar* 3: 111b (*Ra'aya Meheimna*).

serpent from the right and the latter as the dog from the left.¹²⁷ According to another passage, Samael, the archon associated with Esau, is identified as the element of fire, and Rahab, the archon associated with Ishmael, is the element of water. Corresponding to these two forces are the messiah of Joseph to the left and the messiah of David to the right.¹²⁸ In yet another passage, according to the reading that may be retrieved from manuscript, Jesus and Muḥammad are identified as dead dogs or, alternatively, as dog and ass.¹²⁹

According to other passages in the main body of zoharic literature, as I have already intimated, Islam is granted an intermediary status between the true faith of Israel and the idolatry of Christianity. The matter is expressed in a particularly poignant way in a homily connected to the prohibition of worshipping idols:

‘You shall have no other gods before my face.’ R. Isaac said: ‘Other gods’—to exclude *Shekhinah*. ‘Before my face’—to exclude the faces of the king, for through them the holy king is seen, and they are his name. He is they and they are his name . . . he and his name are one . . . R. Simeon taught: Praiseworthy are Israel for the holy One, blessed be he, called them *adam*, as it is written ‘For you, my flock, that I tend are men’ (Ezek. 34: 31), ‘If any man amongst you brings an offering’ (Lev. 1: 2). Why did he call them *adam*? Because it is written ‘and you shall cleave to the Lord, your God’ (Deut. 4: 4). ‘You’ and not the other idolatrous nations, and therefore ‘you are men’, you are called *adam* and not the idolatrous nations. As it has been taught: R. Simeon said that when a Jewish man (*de-var nash yisra’el*) is circumcised, he enters the covenant that God decreed with Abraham, as it is written ‘And the Lord blessed Abraham in everything’ (*ba-kol*) (Gen. 24: 1). . . . When he began to fulfil the commandments of Torah, he entered into that *adam*, and he was conjoined to the body of the king, and then he was called *adam*, and the seed of Israel are called *adam*. Come and see: it is said with respect to Ishmael ‘he will be a wild ass of a man’ (Gen. 16: 12), a ‘wild ass of a man’ (*pere adam*) and not a ‘man’ (*adam*). [He is called] ‘a wild ass of a man’ because he is circumcised and the beginning of the human form is in him, as it is written, ‘And his son Ishmael was thirteen years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin’ (Gen. 17: 25). As a result of being circumcised, he entered the beginning that is called ‘all’ (*kol*), as it is written, ‘He shall be a wild ass of a man’, and not a man. ‘His hand in everything’ (*yado va-kol*), certainly but no more because he did not receive the commandments of Torah. The beginning is found in him because he was circumcised but he was not complete in the commandments of Torah. But the seed of

¹²⁷ *Zohar* 3: 124a.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.* 3: 246b.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.* 3: 282a. The corrected version of this text based on the manuscript reading is offered by Tishby, *Wisdom*, 70. The association of Muḥammad with the dog is especially noteworthy as in Islamic tradition the canine is often portrayed as a defiling animal and contact with it necessitates ablution. See *Muslim Jesus*, 122.

Israel, which is perfected in everything, is called a man, and it is written, 'For the Lord's portion is his people, Jacob his own allotment' (Deut. 32: 9).¹³⁰

The spiritual rank of the three faiths is expressed by the assumption that the term *adam* is applied exclusively to Israel, *pere adam* to Ishmael, and the exclusion of Edom from any configuration of this name, which implies that Christians are not to be considered human in the most exact sense. As I noted in passing with respect to Abulafia in the preceding chapter, there is an ironic twist in the zoharic text—the very people guilty of idolatry on account of worshipping the human representation of God are excluded thereby from the category of humanity. In contrast to the uncircumcised Christian, the Muslim at least falls under the category of 'human', although he is not perfectly human as the Jew, and thus he is called *pere adam* as opposed to *adam*.¹³¹ By virtue of circumcision the Muslim is able to attain the level of *Shekhinah*, his ontological root (related exegetically to the expression *yado va-kol*, since the word *kol* can function as a symbolic circumlocution for *Shekhinah*). The Jew attains a higher position in the sefirotic pleroma, which is related to the fact that the halakhic rite of circumcision involves two acts, *milah*, cutting the foreskin, and *peri'ah*, pulling back the inner membrane to disclose the corona. As a result of these two ritual actions, the Jew is conjoined to *Malkhut* and *Yesod*, the ninth and tenth gradations whose unification signifies the androgynous unity of the Godhead.¹³² In contrast to the uncircumcised Christian, the Muslim at least falls under the category of 'human' (*adam*), although he is not perfectly human as the Jew since only the latter undergoes both *milah* and *peri'ah*.

¹³⁰ *Zohar* 2: 86a.

¹³¹ See Viṭal, *Eṣ ha-Da'at Tov*, 81–2 (ad Ps. 124: 8). In that context, Viṭal uses the zoharic contrast of Israel as *adam* and Ishmael as *pere adam* to ground the idea that the exile of Islam is harder than the other four kingdoms specified in Daniel's apocalyptic vision. The proof-text that anchors this idea is 'Were it not for the Lord, who was on our side, when men (*adam*) assailed us' (Ps. 124: 2), a reference to *pere adam*, that is, Ishmael, who will have control over the people of Israel.

¹³² *Zohar* 1: 96b: "Open for me the gates of righteousness" (Ps. 118:19). What does this mean? Every Jewish male who is circumcised enters both of them and is worthy of both of them.' The plural 'gates of righteousness' alludes to the two *sefirot*, *Yesod* and *Malkhut*, and the one who is circumcised according to rabbinic law merits to enter both of them in contrast to Islamic circumcision that affords one the opportunity of being conjoined to *Malkhut* alone and not to *Yesod* (see below n. 134). See *Zohar* 1: 97b–98b (*Sitrei Torah*): "The opening of the tent" (Gen. 18: 1), the mystery of the Gate of Righteousness (*ṣedeq*), the opening of faith, for then Abraham entered the holy marking (*reshima qaddisha*). "In the heat of the day", this is the Righteous One (*ṣaddiq*), the gradation of the one bond through which the one who is circumcised enters, and he is marked with the holy marking. He is removed from the foreskin and he enters the covenant (*qiyuma*) of these two gradations that are the mystery of faith (*raza di-meheimanuta*). In this context, the two *sefirot* to which the circumcised Jewish male is conjoined are designated respectively as *ṣedeq* and *ṣaddiq*.

Hence, at the conclusion of the homily the non-Jew who converts and is circumcised is called a 'righteous convert' (*ger ṣadeq*) in contrast to Ishmael who is not designated by the term *ger* since he is the son of Abraham, the 'son of holiness'.¹³³ Israel are said to be united with the 'supernal faces of the king', that is, the emanations on the side of holiness, 'the faces in which he and his name are united', but the 'rest of the nations are united with those distant faces', the emanations on the side of impurity, the 'lower faces'. On account of Abraham's having circumcised Ishmael the latter occupies a special position in that he rules over all the other nations, which is the intent of the biblical expression *yado va-kol*, 'his hand is in everything' (Gen. 16: 12), that is, he has dominion over the lower faces of the idolatrous nations, which is alluded to in the continuation of the verse, 'and he shall dwell over the face of all his brothers', *we-al penei khol eḥav yishkkon*. Additionally, the term *ba-kol* has a theosophic significance, referring to *Shekhinah*, the last of the *sefirot*, which is the place accorded Ishmael in the divine realm, a point derived exegetically as well from the verse, 'you shall have no other gods before my face' (Exod. 20: 3), that is, the face, which is the 'faith' of Ishmael, is separated from the 'other gods', the idols that belong to the other side. The positioning of Ishmael in the sefirotic world is thus related primarily to the fact that Muslims practice circumcision, albeit distinguishable from the Jewish rite.¹³⁴

The ontological status of the 'holy seed' is applied exclusively to the people of Israel, for it is connected to the seal of circumcision, which is manifest only as a result of the exposure of the phallic corona. As Moses de León puts the matter in his *Mishkan ha-Edut*:

Know that the secret of the covenant inscribed on our flesh is the seal of the holy One, blessed be he, and this is the covenant of Abraham our patriarch inscribed in the sign of the holy phallus in the secret of the name of God. When the foreskin and the impurity are removed from it, the phallus is crowned in 'a crown of beauty and a diadem of glory' (Isa. 28: 5). 'You shall be a glorious crown in the hand of the Lord' (Isa. 62: 3), inscribed and sealed in the sign of the holy phallus, the letter *yod*, which is elevated in holiness over all the other letters and it is the first [letter] of his great and holy name. He sealed it in the flesh of his people, 'his own allotment' (Deut. 32: 9), so that they would be inscribed in his seal since they are 'a seed the Lord has blessed' (Isa. 61: 9). The seed that comes forth from this sign is the holy seed (*zera qodesh*).¹³⁵

¹³³ *Zohar* 2: 87a.

¹³⁴ See Wolfson, 'Circumcision and the Divine Name', 98–9; id., *Through a Speculum*, 366, n. 142; Kiener, 'Image of Islam', 48, 54–60. The contrast between Jewish and Muslim circumcision is a theme that persists in later kabbalistic literature. See e.g. Ṣemaḥ, *Ṣemaḥ Ṣaddiq*, 37b–c. For a detailed account of circumcision in Islamic sources, see Kueny, 'Abraham's Test', and the brief remarks in Hidayatullah, 'Islamic Conceptions', 284–5.

¹³⁵ MS Berlin, Staatsbibliothek Or. Quat. 833, fol. 22b, corrected in part by MS Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica ebr. 283, fol. 157a.

In a passage from *Sheqel ha-Qodesh*, de León emphasizes the fundamental difference between the circumcision demanded by Jewish law and that of the Muslim tradition, for the latter lacks both *peri'ah* and *tevilah* (ceremonial immersion).¹³⁶ Most importantly, in that context, de León insists that sexual intercourse with a Muslim woman is prohibited for the male Jew. De León delineates the differences between Islam and Christianity concerning theological belief (the proclamation of monotheism) and ritual practices (circumcision and the interdiction against forbidden food and drink), which would suggest that Islam is closer in spirit to Judaism, but he nevertheless declares that with respect to the issue of intimate relations there is no disparity between Christian and Muslim women, for both are considered to be in the category of a menstruant who is forbidden.¹³⁷ One can surmise that reflected in de León's admonition is the social reality that aristocratic Jewish men of his time more often had Muslim rather than Christian concubines.¹³⁸ He thus felt it necessary to warn his co-religionists that a Muslim woman (*yishma'elit*) is considered to be a Gentile (*goyah*) with whom sexual intercourse is categorically prohibited. It is also possible that de León is reflecting a view attested in a zoharic homily, as we have seen, that ascribes sexual wantonness to Ishmael. Be that as it may, de León clearly follows the main line in the zoharic anthropology, which for the most part accords the Muslim a place in the divine scheme in contrast to the Christian. Only in the latter strata of the zoharic corpus is emphasis placed unequivocally on the demonic nature of Ishmael even though, as we have seen, on occasion that depiction is attested in the earlier literary strata as well. The proximity of Islam and Judaism is linked primarily to the shared ritual of circumcision, but it is precisely that ritual that most clearly demarcates the difference between the two monotheistic communities, for the distinguishing feature of Jewish circumcision is the act of *peri'ah*, which results in the disclosure of the corona, the sign of the covenant. The Muslim male, therefore, remains unmarked, even though he is incorporated into the divine physiology, assuming a position beneath the wings of *Shekhinah*, the last of the sefirotic emanations, by virtue of his cutting away the foreskin.

¹³⁶ *Sheqel ha-Qodesh*, 54. See Wolfson, 'Circumcision and the Divine Name', 98–9; id., *Through a Speculum*, 366, n. 142; Kiener, 'Image of Islam', 58–9.

¹³⁷ *Sheqel ha-Qodesh*, 53–4. In this connection, it is of interest to recall that Maimonides recorded the licentious behaviour of several Muslim sects. See Schlossberg, 'Attitude of Maimonides', 56–7. On the portrayal of both Christians and Muslims as lax with respect to laws of menstrual purity, see the view of Abraham Cardoso discussed in Wolfson, 'Constructions', 31, n. 63.

¹³⁸ See Baer, *History*, 1: 259–60; Assis, 'Sexual Behavior', 37; Nirenberg, 'Love Between Muslim and Jew', 135–8.

By way of summary, we may say that, according to the predominant symbolism of the *Zohar*, an intrinsic distinction is maintained between Jew and both Christian and Muslim on the basis of circumcision. The circumcised phallus, which bears the mark of the divine covenant in the flesh, is the locus of the collective memory that renders history meaningful in a unique way for the Jewish people. Rejecting the universalizing and spiritualizing tendencies of Christianity, the zoharic author insists that the site of salvation remains the embodied sign of circumcision. The identity of the Jew, even in the messianic age, is inextricably linked to the sign inscribed on the flesh. Circumcision, therefore, signifies the ontic difference between Jew, Christian, and Muslim, but also the gender difference between male and female within the body politic of Israel. However, as I have noted in a number of my studies,¹³⁹ an essential element of the theosophic teaching proffered by the zoharic authorship is that the female itself is an aspect of the male, a point underscored by the androgynous nature of covenant in general and that of circumcision in particular. As an illustration of this idea I will cite a remark of de León: 'The secret of the covenant (*sod ha-berit*) is the corona (*aṭarah*) in the secret of the glorious crown (*aṭeret tif'eret*), and when a person is circumcised and he enters the secret of the holy covenant, he enters two gradations that are one unit, the Corona (*aṭarah*) and the Eternally Living One (*ḥei ha-olamim*), the secret of the All (*kol*), and all is one unit.'¹⁴⁰ By means of the rite of circumcision, therefore, one is conjoined to *Yesod* and *Malkhut*, the Eternally Living One (or the All) and the Corona, which constitute one entity. In a conspicuously androcentric manner, the female aspect is assimilated into the male. In a similar vein, one could argue that the Christian should find his restoration in the Jew, for the otherness of Edom is overcome in the reintegration of the demonic into the divine. It is important to note that in terms of medieval gender stereotypes another profound reversal is at work here: the Jew is associated with masculine virility (emblematic of divine grace) and the Christian with feminine constriction (symbolic of divine judgement), which is most fully expressed in the monastic ideal of celibacy or sexual impotency.¹⁴¹ The 'other god' is thus portrayed as the castrated being (the emasculated male) who stands in antithetical opposition to the phallic potency of the divine. But the cultural and gender boundaries are fluid, for the process of history, culminating with the coming of the messiah, is perceived as the

¹³⁹ For references, see Ch. 1, n. 275.

¹⁴⁰ 'Sefer ha-Mishkal', 133. I have translated according to the version of this passage extant in MS Florence, Bibliotheca Laurentiana Plut. 88.42, reconstructed from the editor's apparatus. This reading, more or less, conforms to that which is found in the printed edition of Basel, 1608. For parallels, see *Zohar* 1: 13a; 3: 91b–92a.

¹⁴¹ See Ch. 1, n. 275.

engenderment of memory by means of which the bifurcation of male and female, Jew and Christian, is surmounted.

CONVERSION AND THE OTHERING OF THE OTHER

The Spanish kabbalists who belonged to the circle that produced the zoharic literature emphasize that the concept of holiness underlying the normative framework of rabbinic halakhah, epitomized by the laws prohibiting sexual relations with Gentiles, the maintenance of family purity, and the injunction against eating ritually unfit foods, reflects a dualism of light and darkness. The task, accordingly, is to keep the two spheres separate, to prevent the penetration of the demonic left into the divine right, often portrayed in the erotically charged myth of Samael forcefully entering into and inseminating *Shekhinah*. There are, however, other passages wherein this polarity is itself challenged by a more monistic, and ultimately paradoxical, view according to which the opposites of good and evil are identified. Given the symbolic identification of Judaism and Christianity as Jacob and Esau, the twin brothers who emerged from the womb of Rebekah, one would expect a blurring of boundaries along these lines.¹⁴² In the present historical period Edom is the evil twin of Jacob, the uncircumcised one whose saviour is depicted as one born of a menstruant woman. In the messianic redemption, however, the demonic force of Edom will be restored to the Godhead and the dualism will be transcended. The polemical opposition between Jacob and Esau, forces of light and darkness, is resolved in the ultimate act of reconciliation, which involves the othering of the other so that the other is itself a manifestation of self.¹⁴³ In a sense, the transformative process embraced by kabbalists is a metaphysical reinscription of the prophetic ideal of all nations joining peacefully together with Israel in the worship of one God, an ideal that is also affirmed in rabbinic literature even if in the very context in which it is expressed one can discern antipathy towards the other nations.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴² Also relevant to this blurring of boundaries are references to biblical figures who married non-Israelites, e.g. Moses (Exod. 2: 22) and Solomon (1 Kgs 3: 1).

¹⁴³ The strategy I have applied to zoharic literature may be compared to the tendency apparent in some thirteenth-century Christian missionaries who sought to convert Jews and/or Muslims by emphasizing the common denominator between the religious cultures. See Green, 'Ramon Llull and the Jews'.

¹⁴⁴ This is evident, for instance, in the aggadic passage in Babylonian Talmud, Pesahim 118b concerning God's instruction to the messiah to accept the prayer offerings of Egypt, Ethiopia, and Rome. For discussion of this text, see Levinas, *In the Time of the Nations*, 92–108. I do not agree with Levinas that the ultimate message of the talmudic text is the construction of a 'new

The messianic overcoming of difference is proleptically experienced in the historical phenomenon of conversion, which involves the trespassing of the boundary of identities in a manner that problematizes the ontological categories that inform the general anthropological orientation of the zoharic text. I refer here in particular to the conversion of the Christian who, by adopting the faith of Abraham, is transformed from a soul rooted in the demonic realm to one that derives from the divine.¹⁴⁵ As de León succinctly expressed the matter in one of his Hebrew compositions:

You must know that the uncircumcised nations have no soul except from the side of impurity, for they are immersed in the foreskin, and on account of this their spirits are impure. . . . When they remove from themselves this filth, which is the foreskin, their impurity departs from them, and they approach their purity by means of the true justice (*ha-šedeq ha-amitti*). Thus the convert is called the righteous convert (*ger šedeq*), for this is the gradation of the covenant (*madregat ha-berit*), and this is the secret of the covenant (*sod ha-berit*) and the eternal life (*hei ha-olam*), which is the secret of Sabbath (*sod shabbat*).¹⁴⁶

Conversion entails an ontological transmutation, for the soul of the convert divests itself of its demonic character and enters into the divine realm of holiness. The point of access, and the grade to which this soul is attached, is the last of the sefirotic emanations, which is referred to in the above passage by several names, 'justice', the 'secret of the covenant', 'eternal life', and the 'secret of Sabbath'. The technical name of the convert, *ger šedeq*, derives from the fact that the divine presence, the sefirotic gradation to which the convert is conjoined, is referred to as 'justice' (*šedeq*).¹⁴⁷ The convert thus assumes a new identity in a manner similar to Abraham, referred to on the basis of an older

humanity' (p. 106); moreover, the negative assessment of the non-Israelite nations implied in this very passage is not properly noted by the philosophic exegete. Nevertheless, Levinas is right to focus on this text as an important rabbinic affirmation of the prophetic notion that there will be a reconciliation of Israel and her enemies in the messianic future. By contrast, consider the rather strident tone of the eschatological exegesis of the verse 'You bring on darkness and it is night, when all the beasts of the forests stir', in *Midrash Otiyyot de-Rabbi Aqiva*, 347: 'This teaches that this world is compared to night and the kings of the nations are compared to beasts who move about in the forest at night, and when the dawn breaks just as all the beasts return to their places in the forest so all the kings of the earth and princes of the world when the world-to-come and the messianic kingship come upon them they return to their places in the forest and they descend from their greatness and return to the dust, and they do not enter the world-to-come, as it says "And the Lord will be king over all the earth" (Zech. 14: 9).'

¹⁴⁵ It is of interest to consider in this context the view expressed by Shapira, *Maššat Shimmurim*, 46c: the illumination of the mixed multitude comes from the right of Jacob and that of Esau comes from the left, and from them the converts in the world emerge. Converts thus derive from the mixed multitude and Esau, but not from Ishmael.

¹⁴⁶ 'Sefer ha-Mishkal', 132.

¹⁴⁷ *Zohar* 1: 13a–b, 96a.

rabbinic source¹⁴⁸ as the ‘first of the converts’ (*qadma’ah la-giyyorin*).¹⁴⁹ The convert may also be compared to the ancient Israelites when they were liberated from their enslavement to the demonic (symbolized by Egypt) and entered the mystery of faith, a drama that is ritually enacted annually by the obliteration of the leaven bread and the consequent partaking of the unleavened bread of affliction. Thus, the mystical intent of the Sinaitic theophany is rendered symbolically as the subjugation of the other side that makes possible the revelation of Torah and the full consecration of the name. In the language of one zoharic passage: ‘When Jethro came, and the holy One, blessed be he, received him and drew him close to the worship of him, from there all the converts were drawn close beneath the wings of *Shekhinah*, and from there “his name is holy and awesome” (Ps. 111: 9), for then the name of the holy One, blessed be he, was sanctified, as the holy name is sanctified when the other side is broken and subdued, as in the case of Jethro.’¹⁵⁰

The phenomenon of conversion challenges in a fundamental way the axiological framework of zoharic symbolism, which is rooted in an ontological dualism that distinguishes Israel as the holy seed from the rest of the peoples of the earth. Perhaps the most striking challenge to the duality of the divine versus the demonic occurs in the discourse regarding the soul of the convert that appears in the literary unit known as *Sabba de-Mishpatim*, which is named after the fact that the zoharic interpretation of this section of Exodus (21–4) is presented as the teaching of the mysterious elder. In this extraordinary passage, the mystery of the convert is related exegetically to the verse, ‘If a priest’s daughter marries a layman’ (Lev. 22: 12), for the ‘priest’s daughter’ (*bat kohen*) refers symbolically to the holy soul of the Jew, and the ‘layman’ (*ish zar*) to the body of the non-Jew, which derives from the estranged world of the demonic power. The mystery is related as well to the laws pertaining to the sale of an Israelite woman by her father into slavery (Exod. 21: 7–11), for the daughter refers symbolically to the Jewish soul and the father to God. The entrapment of the Jewish soul, which is the pneumatic spark that emanates from the world of divine light, in the darkness of the demonic comes about in one of two ways: according to one possibility, the alienation of God results from the fact that the male Jew transgresses sexually

¹⁴⁸ According to a statement attributed to Rava in Babylonian Talmud, Sukkah 49b (and repeated in Hagigah 3a), Abraham is assigned the title *tehillah la-gerim*, the ‘first of the converts’. On the rabbinic portrait of Abraham as a proselyte (in some passages related to his own circumcision at the age of 99 according to Gen. 17: 24) or as one who (together with Sarah) was engaged in the process of converting others (derived exegetically from Gen. 12: 5), see Porton, *Stranger*, 58, 91, 139, 197, 211, 217, 224, n. 45, 256, n. 85, 262, n. 142, 319, n. 310.

¹⁴⁹ *Zohar* 2: 95a. See 1: 95a; Wijnhoven, ‘Zohar and the Proselyte’, 125–7.

¹⁵⁰ *Zohar* 2: 68a.

by engaging in intercourse with the Gentile woman and thereby imprisons the divine soul in the force of the evil inclination.¹⁵¹ There is, however, another possibility embraced by the zoharic authorship to explain the status of the convert: the conversion comes about when a Christian soul desires to become Jewish, a desire that brings about the transformation of the demonic soul into a spark of divinity. In either case, the zoharic text reworks an ancient gnostic myth in distinctively ethnocentric terms, for the alienation of spirit is not related to the general condition of human embodiment, but rather to the particular embodiment of the Jewish soul in the Christian body. The possibility for conversion is facilitated by the suffering and oppression of the Jewish soul in the body of the Christian, which is manifest in the historical domination of Jacob by Esau. Beyond the historical plane, moreover, this oppression signifies the anguish of the divine spark trapped in the shell of the demonic.

The discussion on the nature of the soul of the convert is placed in the zoharic text in proximity to a hermeneutical discourse regarding the concealment of secrets in the Torah. It is reasonable to conclude that this proximity underscores the fact that in the mind of the zoharic authorship the ontological account of the convert, which entails the garbing of the holy seed of the Jewish soul in the Christian body, sheds light on the notion of secrets being cloaked in the letters of Torah. Indeed, just as in the case of the convert the external garment conceals the inner soul revealed therein, so in the case of Torah the literal sense is the covering that hides but also reveals the secret meaning. Accordingly, the task of reading does not necessitate the complete

¹⁵¹ Ibid. 2: 95a–b. Cf. the use of the expression *guf zar*, ‘alien body’, in 1: 127a (*Midrash ha-Ne’elam*). In that context as well it is clear that the word *zar* refers more specifically to the non-Jew. I would thus respectfully take issue with Giller’s assertion, ‘Love and Upheaval’, 36, that *ish zar*, the ‘non-priest,’ symbolizes the physical body in an apparently generic sense. Giller himself notes that throughout this zoharic section the ‘images of ascent and descent are employed to underscore the strained relationships between Jews and Gentiles’. The interpretation of *ish zar* as a reference to the body of a non-Jew, or specifically that of a Christian, supports his claim regarding the underlying tension of this literary unit. The alienation to which the zoharic authorship alludes in this case is not the generic imprisonment of the soul in the physical body, but it relates more precisely to the entrapment of the Jewish soul in a Christian body. In this respect, one might distinguish the zoharic myth of the alienation of the Jewish soul in the body of the Christian from the gnostic myth of the estrangement of the soul in general in the body, which has its roots in Platonic thought. In spite of the many important developments in scholarly research concerning the phenomenon of Gnosticism in its multivalent nature, one of the most articulate formulations of this rudimentary element in gnostic myth remains Jonas, *Gnostic Religion*, 48–99. Many scholars have noted the Platonic element of Gnosticism in its classical expression. For a review of this relationship, with reference to a number of the relevant studies, see Pearson, *Gnosticism*, 148–64. The kabbalistic orientation can be considered an ethnocentric application of the more generic philosophic position that lies at the core of the gnostic worldview, and this applies even to those gnostic texts that seem to be based on the notion of the fall of Sophia, which may be related in part to the Hellenistic Jewish speculation on wisdom (*hokhmah*). See MacRae, ‘Jewish Background’.

discarding of the garments for the soul to be disclosed. On the contrary, the language of *Zohar* is very precise: the wise ones, who are full of eyes, see the hidden matter only through the garment (*mi-go levushah*).¹⁵² After having established the general hermeneutical point, the zoharic authorship returns to the specific example of the convert:

In several places the holy One, blessed be he, gave a warning about the convert so that the holy seed will be forewarned regarding him, and afterward the concealed matter comes out from its sheath. When it is revealed, it returns immediately to its sheath wherein it is garbed. In every place that he gave a warning about the convert, the matter came out from its sheath and was revealed, and it says, 'You know the soul of the convert' (Exod. 23: 9). Immediately it entered its sheath, and returned to its garment wherein it was concealed, as it is written [in the continuation of the verse], 'For you were converts in the land of Egypt'. Scripture thought that since it was immediately garbed, there was no one taking heed of it. Through the soul of the convert the holy soul knows of the matters of this world and derives pleasure from them.¹⁵³

The zoharic authorship reveals the mystical intent of the biblical assertion that the Israelites were 'strangers', *gerim*, in Egypt, a historical reflection that is meant contextually to legitimate the moral prescript not to oppress the stranger. The rationale for the ethical injunction to act kindly toward the convert is the historical claim that the Israelites were converts themselves. From the zoharic vantage-point, however, this is a secret that must be concealed. Most remarkable is the literary intent assigned to Scripture itself: 'since it was immediately garbed, there was no one taking heed of it.' The operative notion of the secret espoused by the medieval kabbalists, epitomized by this zoharic text, involves the doubling of mystery: the Torah hides the secret it hides. That is, the ultimate dissimulation of Torah lies in the pretence that there is no secret. So profound is the mystery of conversion that the secret conceals its own secrecy, the dissimulation hides itself in the mirror of the text.¹⁵⁴ To reveal the secret the concealment must be concealed, and thus the Torah seeks to hide the fact that the ancient Israelites were converts. But, of course, the zoharic author (that is, the kabbalistic luminary) knows better, and thus he uncovers the secret by bringing forth the hidden matter from beneath its sheath. In so doing, the secret no longer conceals its own secrecy in the masquerade of truth that is image. In the game of hide-and-seek, the

¹⁵² I am here repeating and expanding my argument in 'Beautiful Maiden', 169–70. See also *Language, Eros, Being*, 222–4.

¹⁵³ *Zohar* 2: 98b–99a.

¹⁵⁴ My formulation here is indebted to the description of truth as the feminine in Irigaray, *Marine Lover*, 89. On the trope of the book as a mirror analysed in historical perspective, see Grabes, *Speculum*, 101–2.

mystic interpreter dis/covers the secret hiding beneath the garment. The selling of the Israelite maiden into slavery and the marriage of the priest's daughter to a stranger, the two scriptural accounts related to the fate of the convert, both signify the displacement of the divine spark in a foreign body. To uncover the mystery that the ancient Israelites were converts is to understand ultimate truth as the paradoxical coincidence of opposites: just as the soul of the Jew is embodied in the personhood of the Christian, so the divine inhabits the form of the demonic. To reveal this secret, moreover, has soteriological value inasmuch as the investiture of the esoteric sense in the letters of Torah is understood as the exile of the divine. The interpretative activity of the kabbalist, which is primarily the unveiling of the mystical import of Scripture, reveals the secret garbed in the cloak of the text and thereby redeems the aspect of God imprisoned in the form of the incarnate Torah.¹⁵⁵

But what does this analogy tell us about the zoharic attitude toward the non-Jew as other? It is important to note that the literary framing of the section wherein this discourse is presented involves the utterance of parables on the part of the elder. The use of the parable is to underscore the theme of reversal, and indeed the very first reversal is the realization that the elder, who seemed to be a foolish and ignorant mule-driver, is in fact one who possesses the wisdom to reveal the deepest secrets. The parabolic expression of truth is the only appropriate way to depict the hermeneutical claim that the

¹⁵⁵ The sense of suffering on the part of God in his giving the Torah (personified in distinctively erotic terms as the feminine entity in which the male glory takes delight) to Israel is implied in a number of rabbinic statements. See e.g. Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 89a; *Exodus Rabbah* 33: 1. The latter passage, which entails the parabolic image of God being sold together with the Torah to Israel, had an important impact on a parable in *Sefer ha-Bahir*, which in turn influenced subsequent kabbalists. See Scholem, *Origins*, 170; Wolfson, *Circle*, 11–12. See esp. the commentary of Naḥmanides to Exod. 25: 3. The esoteric significance, which Naḥmanides marks by his signature expression 'by way of truth' (*al derekh ha-emet*), of the offering (*terumah*) is related to the wisdom that God gave to Solomon, i.e. the feminine *Shekhinah* that is imparted as a gift by the father (or the upper wisdom) to the son. In the context of alluding to this mystery, Naḥmanides refers explicitly to the aggadic comment in *Exodus Rabbah* 33: 1, to which he adds the following interpretative gloss: 'For the gift (*terumah*) will be for me and I am with her, in the manner of "My beloved is mine and I am his" (Song 2: 16), and thus it says "Exactly as I show you" (*ke-khol asher ani mar'eh otkha*) (Exod. 25: 9), for the I (*ani*) refers to the vision (*mar'eh*). Naḥmanides is alluding to the fact that *Shekhinah*, which is designated by the first-person pronoun, is the speculum through which the divine appears, a speculum that is related as well to Torah, which is the wisdom bestowed as a gift upon Israel by God. The nexus of Torah, which is the prism by means of which the divine light is refracted, and the exile of *Shekhinah* is also implicit in the zoharic parable according to my reading. The incarnation of *Shekhinah* in the form of Torah, which entails the suffering of God exiled in the letters of the material scroll, is a foundational aspect of the overall hermeneutical approach adopted by Naḥmanides. See Wolfson, *Circle*, 15–16, and the more elaborate analysis in *Language, Eros, Being*, 190–260. On the incarnational aspect in the thought of Naḥmanides, see also Wolfson, 'Secret of the Garment'; id., *Through a Speculum*, 63–4.

secret manifests itself through the garment of the text. Just as there is a glaring disparity in the life of the convert, for prior to the conversion the soul of the potential convert is a Christian on the outside but secretly a Jew, so too dissimulation lies at the core of the Torah insofar as the secret must be garbed in the literal sense. The Torah dons a mask to conceal the truth that it reveals, the divine name—the visible sign of the invisible—hidden in the linguistic configurations that constitute the textual body of Scripture. If the analogy is carried to its logical conclusion, then it must be said that for the zoharic authorship the concealment of the Jew in the garb of the Christian opens the path to discerning something fundamental about secrecy. The phenomenon of conversion involves the ultimate reversal, for what appears to be so obviously distinct—the priest's daughter married to a foreign man—is undermined by the zoharic exegesis. It is nevertheless the case that the reversal itself is occasioned by a dichotomous orientation wherein the soul of the Jew is depicted as the daughter of the divine and the body of the Christian as the unclean foreskin that must be removed and discarded. Even if it is the case that the mystical insight helps one see that the foreskin and core are not radically other, as we may have initially thought, the normative framework that facilitates the vision is one in which the dichotomy is posited.

One of the most telling signs of the radical nature of this reversal is the negative portrayal of converts in *Tiqqunei Zohar*.¹⁵⁶ For the purposes of this chapter I shall focus on one homily in particular, which depicts the messianic era as a time in which the Jewish people will rid themselves of the inimical influence of converts so that they will attain the status of the holy nation completely devoid of the amalgam of any other ethnic identity:

Bere'shit, this is Israel, as it is written 'Israel is holy unto the Lord, the first fruits of his harvest' (Jer. 2: 3), without an admixture of the other. He who is holy has no combination of another kind. Since he who is holy has no combination, he must be careful in relation to his spouse . . . he must be careful with regard to his drops [of semen] so that he does not cast them in a place that is not necessary. Therefore, the masters of the Mishnah established, 'Honour your wives for as a consequence you shall become wealthy'.¹⁵⁷ Their honour consists of guarding the first drop so no pollution is made from it, for the pollution of Abraham and Isaac caused the nations of Esau and Ishmael to subjugate their children in exile, and their being tested by fire and by knife saved them from their burning and murder. Since Jacob had no pollution¹⁵⁸ it says regarding his progeny in exile 'Thus Israel dwells securely, alone

¹⁵⁶ *Zohar* 1: 25a; 2: 120b (*Ra'aya Meheimna*); 3: 125b (*Ra'aya Meheimna*); *Tiqqunei Zohar*, § 18, 36b. See, however, *Tiqqunei Zohar*, § 47, 83b.

¹⁵⁷ Babylonian Talmud, Bava Meš'i'a 59a.

¹⁵⁸ *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* on Gen. 35: 22, pp. 43–4; *Genesis Rabbah* 68: 11, p. 783; *Leviticus Rabbah* 36: 5, p. 850; *Sifre on Deuteronomy*, § 31, pp. 49–52; *Pesiqta Rabbati* 39: 3, pp. 850–1.

is Jacob's fountain' (Deut. 33: 28). It says here 'securely' (*beṭaḥ*) and 'alone' (*badad*), and it says there with respect to their going out of exile 'The Lord alone (*badad*) will guide them, no alien god will be with him' (Deut. 32: 12). His children will not have the admixture of converts and on account of this converts are not received in the days of messiah.¹⁵⁹ Concerning the seed of Jacob it says 'You plucked up a vine from Egypt' (Ps. 80: 9), just as a vine does not receive the combination of any other species, so his progeny would guard the sign of the covenant and they would not receive the combination of another kind. Whoever guards the sign of the covenant merits kingship as Joseph. On account of the fact that Israel guards the covenant they will merit royalty, and it says about them 'all of Israel are children of kings'. Since Moses guarded the sign of the covenant it says about him 'Then he became king in Jeshurun' (Deut. 33: 5). Praiseworthy is the one who guards the covenant.¹⁶⁰

The exegetical springboard for the homiletical admonition against cohabiting with Gentiles and accepting converts is the rabbinic interpretation of the word *re'shit*, 'beginning', as Israel.¹⁶¹ The first word of Torah, *bere'shit*, alludes to the Jewish people; they are the 'beginning', the 'first fruits' of God's harvest, which is linked with the notion of holiness. The sanctity of the Jews is measured by their ethnic purity, their separation from all other nations. While there are many forms in and through which this division can be expressed, the one that is accentuated in the above passage is sexual purity. More specifically, the Jewish male is instructed to guard the sign of the covenant by not casting his semen into the unworthy vessel of a non-Jewish woman. By cohabiting with a non-Jew the Jewish male is guilty of mixing species and thereby tearing down the barrier that should separate Jews from other nations. Of the three patriarchs, Jacob is the model of purity since none of his progeny was polluted; by contrast, out of Abraham came Ishmael and out of Isaac Esau, for the holy seed was implanted in an inappropriate place.¹⁶² The remark concerning the Israelites being subjugated by these two

¹⁵⁹ Babylonian Talmud, Yevamot 24b; Avodah Zarah 3b.

¹⁶⁰ *Tiqqunei Zohar*, § 15, 30b.

¹⁶¹ e.g. *Genesis Rabbah* 1: 4, pp. 6–7; *Seder Eliyahu Rabbah* 15, p. 71.

¹⁶² Cf. *Zohar* 3: 111a (*Ra'aya Meheimna*): 'Light revolves because of darkness, the servant of Abraham came forth from darkness and this is the seed of Ḥam. It is sufficient for the servant to be like the master, for Abraham came forth from Terah, an idolater. And darkness [revolves] because of light, this is Ishmael who came forth from Abraham and Esau from Isaac. The secret is that the admixture of the drops [of semen] in a place that was not his caused this. The one who mixes his drop in the maidservant, Maḥalat the daughter of Ishmael, or in the daughter of a strange god . . . compounds good and evil, and he transgresses the command of his master who said "for the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, you must not eat of it" (Gen. 2: 17).' He who intermingles the holy seed in an impure place is said to be punished with reincarnation so that he may repent by becoming engaged with Torah in order to separate good from evil, permissible from forbidden, pure from impure, and ritually fit from ritually unfit. It is instructive that the author of this stratum of zoharic literature, who embraces a notion of the messianic Torah that is beyond all duality (see Ch. 3, n. 309), here advocates the need to keep the realms of holiness

clearly refers to the respective socio-political domination of Islam and Christianity over Judaism in the Middle Ages. Abraham's being tested by fire at Ur of the Chaldeans (a legend linked midrashically to Gen. 11: 31)¹⁶³ and Isaac by the knife of the attempted sacrifice (Gen. 22: 1–19) served as protection for the Jews against the destructive forces of the Christian and Muslim empires. The purity of Jacob typologically anticipates the holiness to be attained in the messianic era when the institution of conversion will be abolished. The Jewish people at that time will be pure like a vine that is not combined with any other species, and thus converts will no longer be accepted.¹⁶⁴ The way for Jews to attain the eschatological state of absolute separateness is through guarding the covenant and avoiding sexual transgression, a level achieved by Joseph and Moses. The one who has reached this level of perfection is depicted as having merited the attribute of royalty (*malkhuta*), which refers technically to *Shekhinah*.

The negative attitude towards converts, which implies a repudiation of the non-Jew more generally, is expressed in rather acrimonious terms in an apocalyptic passage penned by the same kabbalist:

In that time, the eagle will be aroused and it will spread its wings on the admixture of the nations of Esau and Ishmael, for they are Amaleqites, and the evil admixture of Israel, and it will devour them so that not one of them shall survive, to fulfil what is said with respect to Israel, 'The Lord alone will guide them, no alien god will be with him' (Deut. 32: 12). From that point on converts are not received as the masters of Mishnah established, 'In the days of messiah, converts will not be received'. With regard to the idolatrous nations that will remain, the holy One, blessed be he, will arouse the humanly beast (*ḥayyah de-adam*) to rule over them to fulfil in relation to them, 'For the nation or the kingdom that does not serve you shall perish' (Isa. 60: 12), and to fulfil in relation to Israel, 'and rule the fish of the sea, [the birds of the sky, and all the living things that creep on earth]' (Gen. 1: 28) and 'the fear and the dread [of you shall be upon all the beasts of the earth and upon all the birds of the sky—everything with which the earth is astir—and upon all the fish of the sea; they are given to your hand]' (Gen. 9: 2).¹⁶⁵

The messianic era is thus described primarily as a cleansing of the Jewish people from the polluted amalgamation of the descendants of Esau and Ish-

and impurity distinct, a theme basic to the halakhic sensibility of rabbinic tradition. Regarding the proper boundary separating holy and demonic according to the author of *Tiqqunei Zohar*, see Ginsburg, *Sabbath*, 222–3. Let me note, finally, that there is a symbolic disparity between Ishmael and Esau: the notion that the Jewish seed was not implanted in an appropriate place makes sense in the case of the former but not the latter.

¹⁶³ For references, see Ginzberg, *Legends*, 5: 214–15, n. 40; 246, n. 208.

¹⁶⁴ *Zohar* 1: 26a (*Tiqqunim*); *Tiqqunei Zohar*, § 69, 115a.

¹⁶⁵ *Zohar* 2: 120b (*Ra'aya Meheimna*).

mael, that is, Christians and Muslims who had become part of the community of Israel. The rabbinic observation that the days of messiah will be marked by the cessation of conversion to Judaism is given an ontological explanation: the purity of the Jews depends on sealing the borders so that no foreigners enter the covenant. The negative attitude towards non-Jews implied in the aversion to conversion had a profound impact on subsequent kabbalists, who viewed the effacement of the boundary separating Jews and other nations as problematic. For our purposes I will mention the application of this motif in the writings of Viṭal to explain the nature of transgression. In one text, Viṭal writes:

The essence of the sin of primal Adam was that he wanted to draw close to him all the fusion of the heaven, the mixed multitude, and the seventy nations, and in this pattern was also the sin of Moses our master, peace be upon him, when he drew close the mixed multitude and they destroyed and degraded the yoke by making the calf, and we are still in this lengthy exile, for the redeemer will not come to redeem us until we are cleansed and purified from them. This, too, was the sin of King Solomon, peace be upon him, in his desire to draw close converts and as a consequence two women prostitutes arrived . . . and he married the daughter of Pharaoh, and the regular offering of the morning was delayed for four hours,¹⁶⁶ and his mother came and reprimanded him.¹⁶⁷

Viṭal interprets transgression archetypically (exemplified by Adam, Moses, and Solomon) as an attempt to break down the boundary that divides Jew and non-Jew, mixing the holy and unholy. In a second passage, Viṭal elaborates on the sexual dimensions of the transgressive act:

The matter of Nadab and Abihu: Know that the letters of Nadab are *ben dalet*, an allusion to the four sons corresponding to which the Torah speaks,¹⁶⁸ and they are primal Adam and his three sons, for all of them were contained in Nadab and Abihu, for the two of them were without wives. The letters *alef-beit* of Abihu allude to primal Adam, 'he is my father' (*hu avi*). These two had blemished that which primal Adam had blemished, and the blemish was in the 'strange fire' (Lev. 10: 1), which is the 'foreign woman' (Prov. 7: 5),¹⁶⁹ that is, the first Eve who was Lilith with whom primal Adam united prior to Eve.¹⁷⁰ Thus he said 'This one shall be called woman' (Gen. 2:

¹⁶⁶ *Leviticus Rabbah* 12: 2.

¹⁶⁷ *Sefer ha-Liqqutim*, 88c.

¹⁶⁸ Palestinian Talmud, Pesahim 10: 4, 70b.

¹⁶⁹ Viṭal's interpretation is an embellishment of the view expressed in several zoharic homilies explicating the sin of Nadab and Abihu based on the nexus between the 'strange fire' (*esh zarah*), and the 'foreign woman' (*ishshah zarah*). See *Zohar* 1: 73b, 148b; 3: 57b; Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 266–7; 548, n. 38.

¹⁷⁰ The folkloristic tradition that Lilith was the first wife of Adam can be traced to *Alphabet of Ben Sira*. For references, see Ginzberg, *Legends*, 5: 87–8, n. 40. Viṭal's language is indebted to the elaboration of this theme in *Zohar* 1: 19b, 34b; 3: 19a. See Viṭal, *Eṣ Hayyim*, 38: 2, 61a: 'In this

23), and not another. The rabbis, blessed be their memory, alluded to this when they said that Adam pulled on his foreskin,¹⁷¹ that is to say, he united with the first Eve and therefore he produced several spirits and demons.¹⁷² And this is the strange fire of primal Adam, for man (*ish*) and woman (*ishshah*) are fire (*esh*) without *yah*,¹⁷³ and when the name *yah* is between them,¹⁷⁴ which is the true union, there is true fire, but when the name *yah* is removed from between them the strange fire remains and this is the one of which primal Adam took hold, and now Nadab and Abihu failed through this itself for there was none in any generation like them. . . . Moreover, primal Adam sinned for he wanted to draw close all the nations beneath the wings of *Shekhinah* and thus he caused all the evil that came upon him and upon us in this exile. Moses our master, peace be upon him, also stumbled in this and he died in the desert. Similarly, King Solomon, peace be upon him, sinned by drawing converts near.¹⁷⁵

Weaving together in a most artful way various strands from midrashic and zoharic literature, Viṭal explicates the sin of Nadab and Abihu, offering the ‘strange fire’ in the sanctuary before the Lord, as a recurrence of the ‘original sin’, the primal transgression of Adam, cohabiting with the ‘strange woman’, the first Eve, who was Lilith. The prototypical sin—sin in its symbolic valence—is the unworthy union of the holy and demonic. Viṭal adds that Adam was motivated by the desire to draw all the nations beneath the wings of *Shekhinah*, that is, to convert all the nations and thereby efface the boundaries separating Israel and the nations. This gesture, we are told, was responsible not only for all the evil that befell Adam, but for the exile of the Jewish people even to the present. Moses and Solomon similarly erred in this matter. Indeed, this sin is an act that only the high soul is capable of committing—this is the intent of the remark, ‘Nadab and Abihu failed through this itself for there was none in any generation like them’¹⁷⁶—as it is

lower world, which is corporeal, the aspect of Leah could not come out sweetened in the secret of holiness in the time of the creation of primal Adam, and she came out in the aspect of very hard judgements in the secret of the shell, the evil serpent, and this is the aspect of Lilith, the first Eve, who united with Adam before the second Eve was created.’

¹⁷¹ On the rabbinic tradition that Adam was guilty of epispasm, removing the sign of the covenant, which presupposes the idea that he was born circumcised, see Ginzberg, *Legends*, 5: 99–100, n. 78; 268, n. 318; and 273, n. 25.

¹⁷² This echoes another rabbinic tradition concerning Adam’s generating male and female demons; see Babylonian Talmud, *Eruvin* 18b; *Zohar* 1: 19b.

¹⁷³ That is, the consonants of the words *ish* and *ishshah* can be rearranged as the word *esh* repeated twice and the letters *yod-he*, which spell *yah*, the first half of the Tetragrammaton.

¹⁷⁴ Viṭal is playfully reinscribing the interpretation ascribed to Aqiva in Babylonian Talmud, *Sotah* 17a: ‘If man and woman are meritorious, the Presence is between them; if they are not meritorious, fire will consume them’ (*ish wa-ishshah zakhu shekhinah beineihem lo zakhu esh okhlatan*).

¹⁷⁵ *Sefer ha-Liqqutim*, 47b.

¹⁷⁶ According to an older exegetical tradition, attested in Philo and *Sifra*, the death of Nadab and Abihu signified their righteous status as holy men willing to sacrifice the body to be in the presence of God. For references, see Ginzberg, *Legends*, 6: 75, n. 383. An echo of the more

a trespass that is impelled by the mystical discernment of the underlying metaphysical oneness that undercuts all duality, including, most importantly, the social-ritual division of Jew and Gentile. When viewed in this perspective we can discern that the kabbalistic teaching is marked by a discrepancy between the contemplative vision of unity and the practical demands to maintain difference.

Against this background the application of this complex symbolism in the seventeenth century to the pseudo-messianic figure of Sabbatai Şevi becomes most intriguing. In the next chapter I shall discuss this episode in the religious history of Judaism in more detail. For the purpose of the discussion here the focus is far more limited, though by no means inconsequential or trivial, as I will concentrate on the theological status of Christianity and Islam in relation to Judaism as it unfolds from the perspective of Sabbatian eschatology.

Prima facie, the position of Islam as the demonic other would seem to be problematized by the messiah's alleged apostasy and conversion to Islam, but what is so remarkable about the Sabbatian phenomenon is the rejection of a linear logic and the principle of non-contradiction; in Sabbatian thinking, a statement and its negation can be both true at the same time, and thus what appears to be the case proves the truth of its opposite. The donning of the turban, emblematic of the Muslim faith, ostensibly an indication of heresy, is in fact the ultimate external sign giving witness to and justifying the messianic faith. The conversion to Islam signifies, paradoxically, Sabbatai Şevi's true messianic status, for only by wearing the garment of the demonic could he descend to the depths of the demonic to redeem the sparks entrapped therein. The principle was stated succinctly by the Sabbatian visionary Bär Perlhefter: 'The one who wants to conquer the shell must garb himself in that very shell and act in the very pattern, and in that way he overpowers it in the end.'¹⁷⁷

It is likely that the portrayal of Ishmael as the demonic serpent in several zoharic passages influenced Sabbatai Şevi's identification of himself as the 'holy serpent' (attested in the use of a crooked serpent as part of his signature).¹⁷⁸ Of course, there are other reasons to explain the adoption of this symbol, including the numerological equivalence of *naḥash* and *mashiah*, but it is plausible, in light of Sabbatai Şevi's purported conversion to Islam, that the issue I have mentioned is also relevant. In several texts of Nathan of Gaza,

positive assessment of Nadab and Abihu is found in a strand in zoharic literature that portrays their death as the demise of the righteous, which serves as a means of atonement for Israel (*Zohar* 3: 56b, 57b). The zoharic authors use this to explain the rabbinic ruling that this section of Leviticus is to be chanted as part of the liturgy on Yom Kippur (Babylonian Talmud, Megillah 30b).

¹⁷⁷ Elqayam, 'Rebirth', 130.

¹⁷⁸ See above, n. 53.

the theology of paradox, or what Scholem tellingly called 'redemption through sin', is expressed in terms of the statement in *Tiqqunei Zohar*, 'he is good on the inside but his garment is evil' (*ṭav mi-legav u-levusha dileih bish*),¹⁷⁹ which is associated exegetically with the scriptural description of the messianic king, 'yet humble, riding on an ass' (Zech. 9: 9).¹⁸⁰ Thus, commenting on this passage in an epistle written for Joseph Şevi on 7 February 1668, Nathan remarked that the evil garment sported by Sabbatai Şevi was 'the turban that he wore . . . for the situation that will come to him on account of the evil garment is that he must wear it and he will be impoverished from the Torah and impoverished from the commandments'.¹⁸¹ Being attired in the garment (*levush*), which is the turban,¹⁸² signifies the transvaluation of values necessary for redemption: the impoverishment attributed to Sabbatai Şevi indicates that the messiah must sink to the depths of impurity in order to redeem the fallen sparks of his soul-root.¹⁸³ As is well known, a key component of the religious history of Sabbatianism is related to the blatant acts of breaking traditional halakhic practice, culminating in the ultimate act of betrayal, the conversion of Sabbatai Şevi to Islam. These intermittent acts of transgression and the fateful apostasy were transformed by faithful followers of Sabbatai Şevi into a ritualism of paradox largely based on certain presuppositions of Lurianic kabbalah. That is, the abrogation of Jewish law and the adoption of the Muslim religion, which Nathan and other Sabbatians referred

¹⁷⁹ *Tiqqunei Zohar*, § 60, 93b.

¹⁸⁰ Mention should be made of the exegetical application of Zech. 9: 9 to Jesus in Matt. 21: 4–5. See the reworking of this passage in *Toldot Yeshu*, in Krauss, *Das Leben Jesu*, 44, and see below Ch. 4, n. 43.

¹⁸¹ Baruch ben Gershon of Arezzo, *Zikkaron li-Venei Yisra'el*, 60; Sasportas, *Sefer Şiṣat Novel Şevi*, 260–1; Scholem, *Sabbatai Şevi*, 742–3. The same language is used in a letter written by Nathan to Samuel Primo published in Amarillo, 'Sabbatean Documents', 270–1. See also the formulation of Nathan in his letter on Sabbatai Şevi's apostasy, in Scholem, *Studies and Texts*, 244; the letter of Nathan cited by Mahallallel Halleluyah of Ancona, published in Scholem, *Researches*, 67. The view of Nathan is paraphrased in Abraham Cuenque's memoir cited in Emden, *Torat ha-Qena'ot*, 21a. In another letter of Nathan published by Amarillo, 'Sabbatean Documents', 263, reference is made to Zech. 9: 9 as it is interpreted in *Zohar* 3: 69a. According to Nathan's understanding of the zoharic passage, 'riding on an ass' refers to the strange acts committed by the messiah, which are related more specifically to his conversion of Jews to Islam. These heretical acts are in emulation of God, who 'copulates in a place that is not his own'.

¹⁸² In addition to the turban, there are accounts of Sabbati's riding a horse cloaked in a green mantle, which mostly likely betrays a Muslim influence since in the Islamic tradition green is the privileged colour, symbolizing, in particular, the colour of Paradise. See Scholem, *Sabbatai Şevi*, 241–2.

¹⁸³ In a document written in 1666 prior to Sabbatai Şevi's alleged conversion, *Derush ha-Tanninim*, Nathan already explained the entrapment of the messiah in the demonic shells in terms of the task of uplifting the fallen sparks. The text is published in Scholem, *Be-Iqvot Mashiah*, 39–40. See id., *Major Trends*, 291, 296–9; id., *Sabbatai Şevi*, 302–6; id., *Messianic Idea*, 95.

to as the *ma'asim zarim*, the 'strange acts', afforded the pseudo-messiah the opportunity to descend to the realm of the demonic shells (*qelippot*) in order to perform the ultimate rectification (*tiqqun*). What might be judged by the unlightened as transgressive or heretical is, in fact, a profound expression of prophetic piety.¹⁸⁴

The aforementioned verse from Zechariah relates the paradox to the image of riding upon the ass. In light of the accepted symbolic association of Ishmael and the donkey, this is an entirely apt image to signify the sense of being subservient to the faith of Islam, a subservience that actually bespeaks the mastery of the messiah over the demonic realm to which he has succumbed.¹⁸⁵ As Israel Ḥazzan of Kastoria, disciple of Nathan,¹⁸⁶ daringly expressed the matter in his commentary on Psalms:

The three of them—the holy One, blessed be he, *Shekhinah*, and the cherished Son, *Amirah*—are comprised together, and there is no barrier or distinction between them, God forbid, for in the time of exile *Shekhinah* is called by the name 'serpent' . . . and the messiah is also called 'serpent' . . . and this is the secret of the turban that is folded over, and this is the secret of the emanation of the serpent bound to his heel,¹⁸⁷ in the secret of the footholds of the messiah. . . . And this is the secret of the messiah hiding himself in the dust to participate with her in actuality . . . the two of them are called by one name, which is the unique name. . . . Hence, the holy One, blessed be he, *Shekhinah*, and *Amirah* are comprised in one name. We learn, accordingly, that the mind of his creator is within the *Amirah* and there is no barrier or distinction between them.¹⁸⁸

From this passage we discern not only that the messiah's mastery over the demonic is dependent on his submitting thereto, but that the ontological condition that makes this submission possible is the divine status of the messiah coupled with the further presumption that in the exilic state God dons the form of the serpent. To be more precise, Ḥazzan formulated this central tenet of Sabbatian messianism by drawing on what I consider to be an ancient Jewish mythologoumenon concerning the triadic structure of the divine pleroma, that is, the presumption that the shape of the Godhead can be envisioned mythopoeically in terms of two males and one female, configured either as father, son, and daughter, or as father, mother, and son,¹⁸⁹ a

¹⁸⁴ An earlier expression of this sentiment is found in Abulafia, *Ḥayyei ha-Olam ha-Ba*, MS Oxford, Bodleian Library 1582, fol. 59b (printed edn., p. 160). The masses, who are compared to beasts (see Ch. 1, n. 195), consider the prophet to be 'crazy' or a 'heretic' and 'apostate'.

¹⁸⁵ The imagery of the ass as the demonic representation of Islam is particularly pronounced in Perlehefer. See Elqayam, 'Rebirth', 136–8, and relevant notes.

¹⁸⁶ For extensive discussion of this author and his composition, see Scholem, *Researches*, 89–141.

¹⁸⁷ Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 5a.

¹⁸⁸ MS Kaufmann-Budapest 255, fols. 4b–5a.

¹⁸⁹ Wolfson, *Along the Path*, 74–5; id., *Language, Eros, Being*, 155–7.

symbolic constellation that figured prominently as well in the Sabbataian inspired kabbalah enunciated by Abraham Cardoso.¹⁹⁰ The messiah is the son that completes the trinity, an idea that Ḥazzan articulates in the continuation of the aforementioned passage by noting that the name *shabbetai* can be decomposed into *shabbat yod*, the former corresponding to the 'holy Sabbath, the supernal mother', and the *yod* to 'the father', and 'thus in his name is comprised father and mother'.¹⁹¹ The central point worthy of reiteration is that the serpentine status of the messiah, identified specifically as *Amirah*, the honorific title bestowed upon Sabbatai Ṣevi by his followers, is displayed in the folded turban, the emblem of his conversion to Islam.

From the outside, then, it seems as if Sabbatai Ṣevi was lacking good deeds and proper piety in the worship of God. In truth, however, the apparent poverty is spiritual wealth, for it is the sublime excellence of the messiah's soul that allows him to descend to the demonic. The heresy and other seemingly antinomian acts provide the opportunity for the messianic figure to separate holy and profane by penetrating into the realm of evil, a gesture that brings to light the dialectical principle of transgressive piety: to eradicate one must take hold of the root. The paradoxical logic is based on much older kabbalistic sources, including, most importantly, zoharic literature wherein a contrast is made between the perfect righteous individual (exemplified by Moses), who separates the holy from the unholy by plumbing the depths of the unholy, and the imperfect righteous individual (such as Job), who allows the unholy to be mixed with the holy by trying to avoid the unholy entirely.¹⁹² In some passages, moreover, the descent of the righteous to the depths of the demonic is related to the task of saving the souls of others who have sinned. This portrait of the heroic character was applied to Sabbatai Ṣevi as part of the concerted effort to confirm his messianic status. As Baruch of Arezzo reports,

When the sage R. Nathan of Gaza heard that he placed the holy turban on his head, he knew in truth and wholeheartedly that our master gave himself to the shell in order to purify the sparks of holiness from there, just as Abraham had done when he took Hagar the Egyptian, Jacob the daughters of Laban, and Moses the daughter of Jethro. . . . He had to do this in order to rectify the world in the kingdom of Shaddai.¹⁹³

In many of his writings Nathan further explains the apostasy of Sabbatai Ṣevi in terms of the need for the messiah to suffer so that he may atone for the sins of the Jews. For example, in one epistle he writes:

¹⁹⁰ See Wolfson, 'Constructions', 46–57.

¹⁹¹ MS Kaufmann-Budapest 255, fol. 5b.

¹⁹² See Wolfson, 'Left Contained', 34–7.

¹⁹³ *Inyenei Shabbatai Ṣevi*, 58.

From all this we have learnt that the Sabbath did not become profane on account of the donning of the turban, and this is due to the fact that, according to the principle of the sages, blessed be their memory, he had to do this on account of the sins of Israel. What happened to him was like what happened to Queen Esther, and she had to eat forbidden foods, and Mordecai the righteous one said that it was not for naught that Esther was seized, for redemption came through her.¹⁹⁴

Just as Esther, whose true identity is that of Hadassah, assumes the role of another for the sake of redeeming the Jews, so Sabbatai Şevi must adopt the garment of the other as part of the fulfillment of his messianic task; dissimilitude is the form appropriate to disclosing truth.¹⁹⁵ In some Sabbatian texts this idea is portrayed in terms of Sabbatai Şevi's copulating in a space that did not belong to him,¹⁹⁶ an image that is derived from a zoharic passage wherein God is described as the king who has sent away his consort and takes in her place a slave-girl who is identified further as the 'estranged crown' of the demonic power. The precise language of *Zohar* underscores its significance in shaping the Sabbatian mythology: 'Now the "slave-girl supplants her mistress" (Prov. 30: 23), "a righteous one who is delivered" (Zech. 9: 9), for until now he has been riding in a place that is not his, an estranged place, and he has sustained it. It is written, therefore, "humble, riding on an ass" (ibid.).'¹⁹⁷

The Sabbatian idea is based on the theme of the suffering of the righteous on behalf of the people of Israel expressed in earlier sources, which is often associated with the verse, 'But he was wounded because of our sins, crushed because of our iniquities; he bore the chastisement that made us whole, and by his bruises we were healed' (Isa. 53: 5). In one zoharic passage this verse is interpreted as referring to the burial and imprisonment of Moses in the demonic shells.¹⁹⁸ This passage was easily applied to Sabbatai Şevi, as the fate of the first redeemer (Moses) is frequently described by Sabbatian thinkers as having been replicated in the life of the final redeemer.¹⁹⁹ In Sabbatian literature, however, this motif is part of a much larger portrayal of the apostate messiah that may strike the ear as distinctively Christological in tone.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁴ *Inyenei Shabbatai Şevi*, 60; *Şiṣat Novel Şevi*, 260–1.

¹⁹⁵ The orientation exemplified by the Sabbatians, perhaps inspired by the Marrano mentality, is the inverse of the statement of Maimonides in his *Iggeret ha-Shemad*, in *Iggereot ha-Rambam*, 1: 32: 'The one who is openly Gentile and secretly a Jew is a Gentile.'

¹⁹⁶ See letter of Nathan from 1672 published in Amarillo, 'Sabbatean Documents', 263.

¹⁹⁷ *Zohar* 3: 69a.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.* 3: 125b (*Ra'aya Meheimna*).

¹⁹⁹ See Scholem, *Sabbatai Şevi*, 584–6; *id.*, *Researches*, 363; *id.*, *Messianic Idea*, 98; Wirszubski, *Between the Lines*, 186.

²⁰⁰ Scholem, *Sabbatai Şevi*, 720, notes that the attempt to locate a textual source for the apostasy of the messiah through homiletical and exegetical means exhibits a striking analogy to the disciples of Jesus who sought to explain the crucifixion. The paradox of the saviour's atoning death in early Christian thought has a marked similarity to the strategies for explaining Sabbatai

Thus, in addition to the aforementioned notion of the messiah's suffering atoning the sins of Israel, many of the extant texts emphasize the incarnation of the divine in the person of the messiah, the resurrection and second coming of the messiah, the characterization of the messiah as a leader of twelve disciples,²⁰¹ and the unity of the faithful in the mystical body of the messiah,²⁰² to name a few of the more salient examples.²⁰³ It is reasonable to conclude, therefore, that Sabbatian eschatology represented a concerted effort to challenge the boundaries separating Judaism from both Christianity and

Ševi's conversion, which is portrayed as a form of death and burial in the demonic shells, a theme that is connected with a passage in the *Ra'aya Meheimna* section of zoharic literature that explains the burial of Moses outside the land of Israel as a means of atonement for Israel: 'Had he not been buried outside the holy land, outside of his bride, Israel would not have gone out from exile. In relation to him, it says "he was wounded because of our sins" (Isa. 53: 5), he was desecrated on account of the wrongdoing and transgression of Israel' (*Zohar* 3: 280a). The fate of the first redeemer (Moses) was applied by Sabbatians to the final redeemer (Sabbatai Ševi). See the letter of Nathan on the messiah's apostasy in Scholem, *Studies and Texts*, 242–3; and the apocalyptic text of Perlhefter published by Scholem, *Researches*, 558–61. After the physical demise of Sabbatai Ševi, the symbolic interpretation of his burial is linked more precisely with his actual death. See e.g. the text of Perlhefter published by Elqayam, 'Rebirth', 132–4.

²⁰¹ On the possible connection between the twelve disciples of Sabbatai Ševi and the Gospel account of the twelve apostles of Jesus, see the remarks of Scholem, *Sabbatai Ševi*, 222–3. Scholem suggests that the Sabbatian idea may have arisen independently of any external influence. It is also possible, however, that the notion of the twelve disciples reflects the biblical claim that Ishmael would be blessed with the progeny of twelve princes (Gen. 17: 20). See the opinion of Nathan of Gaza cited in the document published by Scholem, *Researches*, 61–2. Evidence for a similar exegesis is found in the text regarding the Dönmeh sect published by Scholem, *ibid.* 299. See also the text of Perlhefter published by Elqayam, 'Rebirth', 138–9. In that context, the twelve princes to emerge from Ishmael are connected to Sabbatai Ševi's son who was given this very name and who was assigned the role of messianic leadership until the second coming of his father. For an elaborate discussion of this theme, see Halperin, 'Son of Messiah'. On the representation of the twelve companions as the twelve tribes of Israel, see the textual and iconographic evidence adduced by Scholem, *Sabbatai Ševi*, 526, 631, 709.

²⁰² An interesting expression of what strikes me to be a Christological representation of Sabbatian belief is found in the anthology of zoharic commentaries extant in MS St Petersburg B268, fol. 2b: "And you shall love your neighbour as yourself" (Lev. 19: 18), numerically [this refers to] *Amirah*, which comprises all of them, and this is the great principle in the Torah with respect to the God of Israel, and concerning it the sages, blessed be their memory, said that the entire world was not created except to command this [Babylonian Talmud, *Berakhot* 6b, *Shabbat* 30b] . . . in the mystery of the entire world was not created except for Ḥanina my son [Babylonian Talmud, *Berakhot* 17b, *Ta'anit* 24b, *Hullin* 86a], which is the name of the *Amirah*. I am grateful to Menachem Sheinberger for drawing my attention to and providing me with a xerox copy of this manuscript. In the collection of commentaries attributed to Jonathan Eybeschuetz, Sabbatai Ševi, designated by the honorific title 'Amirah', is linked to the commandment to love one's neighbour, the ritual embodiment of the whole Torah. The numerology offered in the initial part of the comment is not clear to me, but what is important is the identification of the messiah with the one commandment that encompasses all of the Torah.

²⁰³ See Scholem, *Major Trends*, 307; *id.*, *Sabbatai Ševi*, 282–6, 332–54, 545–8, 795–9; *id.*, *Messianic Idea*, 123–5; Wirszubski, *Between the Lines*, 131; Yerushalmi, *From Spanish Court*, 307, n. 11; Sharot, *Messianism*, 120

Islam. By internalizing images of Ishmael and Edom and attributing them to the messianic figure, the polemical dimension of the zoharic texts discussed above find their own hermeneutical redemption. Not only is the marginal status of the Jew in society challenged by the imaginary configuration of the other, but the messiah himself is constituted by these very images.

In some measure, the apostate messiah as depicted in Sabbatian thought is simultaneously Jew, Muslim, and Christian; indeed, the coalescence or triangulation of the three faiths, each of which is nonetheless preserved in its own theological integrity, bespeaks the spiritual magnanimity of the messiah.²⁰⁴ Perlhefter emphasizes the syncretistic convergence of these faiths in the living body of Sabbatai Şevi:

This is the hidden secret in *Tiqqunei Zohar* 96b,²⁰⁵ as it says, ‘he is good on the inside but his garment is evil, and this is “yet humble, riding on an ass” (Zech. 9: 9)’. That is, ‘humble’ refers to the messiah son of David, and he is also ‘riding on an ass,’ the ass of Ishmael, for therein the messiah son of Joseph is garbed in another garment, and the messiah son of David also changes his garment and puts on the clothing of Esau. He had to be garbed in white like an angel of the Lord, as it is written, ‘As for the angel of the covenant that you desire’ (Mal. 3: 2), but he is now garbed in a red garment. This proves to be a great wonder in the eyes of human beings, and thus they said concerning him, ‘Who is coming from Edom in crimsoned garments from Bozrah’ (Isa. 63: 1). Why are your garments red? Was it not appropriate that you should go in [garments that are] white like the angel of the Lord of hosts? When Jacob saw that he, too, would switch the garment and that it would be red like red wine, he said, ‘He washes his garment in wine’ (Gen. 49: 11). The secret of this matter from these messianic figures is that one must be garbed in the garment of the shell to subjugate it.²⁰⁶

The redeemer is compelled to adopt the faith of Islam, and thus he is humbled by donning the garment of Ishmael as he rides upon the ass, but it is also the case that the messianic figure puts on the garment of Edom, which clearly stands for the vestment of Christianity.²⁰⁷ The biblical paradigm is Jacob who switched from a white to a red garment in order to combat the force of Edom.

²⁰⁴ The subtle interplay of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism in the early modern context of the Sabbatian phenomenon is well captured by Goldish, *Sabbatean Prophets*, 8–55.

²⁰⁵ The reference is to *Tiqqunei Zohar*, § 60, according to the pagination in the Mantua edition, 1558.

²⁰⁶ Scholem, *Researches*, 549.

²⁰⁷ See *ibid.* 550, where Perlhefter reverses the language of *Tiqqunei Zohar* that was applied to Sabbatai Şevi, ‘good on the inside but his garments are evil’, and speaks of the pope (referred to on the basis of Gen. 41: 50 as the priest of On) as evil on the inside with beautiful garments. See *ibid.* 547, where the priest of On is identified as the messiah of the idolatrous nations who will be in the ‘final exile’, a time of spiritual and material poverty. On the identification of the man from On and Samael, see *Tiqqunei Zohar*, § 67, 98b; *Zohar Ḥadash*, 33c; see also *Zohar* 2: 67b; *Tiqqunei Zohar*, § 49, 86a.

Analogously, the messiah of the Davidic lineage puts on the clothing of Esau after he has already been garbed in the garment of Ishmael. Sabbatai Şevi's messianic task involves obfuscating the boundary of both religions vis-à-vis the community of Israel.

Perlhefter's position is perhaps most evident in his description of the messiah rectifying the sin of Adam. Indeed, this is precisely the logic of his defence of the death of the messianic figure.

When he was garbed in the shell, and he ate of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil to rectify thereby the secret of Adam, it was immediately decreed with respect to him 'he shall surely die' (*mot tamut*) (Gen. 2:17), *mot* refers to the first Adam and *tamut* to the last Adam who is the messiah. Through this death the garments of this world will be broken, and they are the leaves of the first Adam, for these are the garments of skin. Secret of secrets: these garments of skin are the garment of the shell of the idolaters from which it is said that Adam was a heretic and pulled on his foreskin, for he drew upon himself the foreskin of the shell. In place of the garments of light, which he had at first and through which he was comparable to the ministering angels... he had garments of skin, that is flesh and skin.²⁰⁸

The Christological resonance of this passage should be obvious. Sabbatai Şevi is the messianic personality whose death occasions the rectification of the sin of Adam. He may have converted to Islam, but the ultimate theological significance of that conversion is the blurring of the line that separates Judaism from Christianity. The sin of Adam in this context is linked to the blemish of the phallus, and it stands to reason from other Sabbatian sources that the sin is related even more specifically to the spilling of semen in vain. Sabbatai Şevi completes a process of repair that began with Abraham, but in so doing it was necessary for him to don the garment of the demonic shell even to the point of his own demise.

The point is expressed in somewhat different and perhaps even more poignant terms by Abraham Cardoso, the Marrano Jew who for a time assigned messianic roles to Sabbatai Şevi and himself. In one of his many discourses Cardoso notes that there are two messianic figures from the side of holiness, one from the masculine and the other from the feminine, which correspond to the two messianic figures in the demonic realm, Samael and the serpent. The former, correlated with the messiah from the line of Ephraim, is identified as Jesus, whereas the latter, correlated with the messiah from the line of David, is identified as the shell of Ishmael.²⁰⁹ For political reasons, it seems, Muḥammad's name is not mentioned explicitly, even though it is

²⁰⁸ Scholem, *Researches*, 550.

²⁰⁹ Scholem, *Studies and Texts*, 289–92.

evident that he is intended. Cardoso describes the clash between Christianity and Islam in the following manner:

Samael and the serpent do not mate and unite in a true and enduring unity, and thus they are the two other gods, but the male and female of holiness from the side of emanation are constantly united, and thus they are one... It is known that the supernal Samael is rooted in the holiness of emanation. Thus Jesus, the messiah of the shell, was born amongst them and he was a Jew... but the Ishmaelite was not born a Jew but a Christian... Those who believe in Jesus denied the covenant of circumcision, for Samael, the other god, is uncircumcised, and the Ishmaelites, whose essential dominion is from the side of the serpent, which is female, rendered permissible the blood of menstruation... The Davidic messiah of holiness will not be born amongst the uncircumcised idolaters like the Ephraimite messiah, but amongst Ishmael.²¹⁰

In the continuation of this passage, Cardoso explains that the Ephraimite messiah appears as an idolatrous Christian and the Davidic messiah as a Muslim. From a gender perspective, moreover, the Christians privilege the worship of the female (in the persona of Mary), whereas Islamic worship is directed exclusively to the male. The true faith of Israel, needless to say, is the union of male and female.

The polemical depictions of Christianity and Islam in zoharic literature are thus fully appropriated by the Sabbatian theologian and applied by him to explain the ironic events of Jewish history, both personal and communal. Sabbatai Şevi and Abraham Cardoso rectify the detrimental impact of Jesus and Muḥammad and thereby render Judaism the superior religion. Tragically, none of this took place in the arena of history and, as we well know, the price of fantasy can often be more exacting than that of reality. The rigid boundaries of the three faiths were rendered fluid by the dialectical power of the Sabbatian theology, but in the process the social and religious norms basic to the fabric of Jewish society were somewhat undermined.²¹¹ The ideational framework of the Sabbatian heresy is unintelligible without a firm grasp of the polemical orientation of the zoharic material vis-à-vis Christianity and Islam.

²¹⁰ Scholem, *Studies and Texts*, 292–4.

²¹¹ On this score, it is relevant to recall the comment of David Nieto lamenting the implications of the abrogation of ceremonial and moral laws implied in the Sabbatian theology of Neḥemiah Ḥiyya Ḥayon, cited in Loewe, 'The Spanish Supplement', 295: 'The holy, elect people of Israel would be changed into an execrable common weal of thieves, falsifiers, perjurers, incestuous adulterers, *sans* God, *sans* law, *sans* conscience, and consequently incapable and unworthy of constituting an element in the civil polity of the various, politically discrete nations of Europe. Is it right that, having ourselves been the teachers of Christian and Moslem inasmuch as we have taken them from the darkness of paganism and illuminated them with some rays of truth, we should ourselves degenerate into so to say professional teachers of heresy, masters of licence and exponents of Atheism?'

In an attempt to place the Jewish people at the very centre of the universe, indeed to deify Israel as the embodiment of the divine, Edom and Ishmael were portrayed in zoharic literature as inferior versions of the holy seed of Abraham. In its medieval setting, this version of the world no doubt bestowed some sense of security upon the anxious Jewish populace. The theosophical centring of the Jew provided a theological means of coping with social, economic, and political marginality. In the premodern context of the Sabbatian heresy, however, this very same strategy evolved into the denial of Israel by assuming that the messianic potential of Judaism can be realized only by adopting the comportment of Edom and Ishmael in the world. The wheel of the polemic thus turned back on itself as the Jew became other to himself.²¹² In the garment of Ishmael and with the body of Edom, the Jewish messiah became the symbol of alienation from within rather than marginalization from without.

²¹² Upon completing this chapter, I came upon Yovel, 'New Otherness'. Yovel's phenomenological analysis of the Marranos from the vantage-point of otherness is instructive in providing further evidence to ascertain the ideational and socio-cultural basis for a crucial aspect of the Sabbatian heresy, as scholars have long noted.

Beyond Good and Evil: Hypernomian Transmorality and Delimiting the Limit

And where there is no law there is no transgression.

(Rom. 4: 15)

‘We are ruled by laws,’ said Reb Mazol. ‘The laws of freedom are the strictest, along with the law of fasting.’ And he added: ‘The laws of light are inspired by the laws of the dark. What is good for one is also good for the other. We have studied the dark and the day through their common voice and conclude that opposites are one.’

(Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*)

AXIOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK OF ETHICAL DUALISM

In this chapter I explore the topic of ethics and mysticism in the history of kabbalah from the vantage-point of the relationship between antinomies that seem basic to moral discernment on the one hand, and the transcendental oneness of mystical experience in which opposites seem to coincide on the other. As I noted in the Introduction, kabbalistic literature is clearly not monolithic in orientation, and thus it must be investigated repeatedly from multiple perspectives. However, in my estimation, an element shared by the diverse range of kabbalists is the nomian framework within which the mystical impulse takes shape, and this applies as well to those kabbalists who push the law beyond its own limits even to the point of affirming that religious observance finds its fulfilment in transgression. In an effort to understand the aspiration to get beyond the duality of good and evil, a tendency to which I refer by the terms ‘hypernomian’ and ‘transmoral’, it is necessary to probe more deeply into the axiological framework of kabbalistic ritual. My working presumption is that there is a reciprocal relationship between the ethos cultivated by kabbalists and their ontology, that is, the values they hold are an expression of their understanding of the nature of being just as

their understanding of the nature of being is an expression of the values they hold.¹

Given the structuring of mystical experience in the Jewish Middle Ages, I do not believe the term 'anomian' is appropriate to describe the spiritual posture of kabbalists, whether theosophic or ecstatic in orientation, according to the typological classification that has dominated the field. In contemporary scholarly discourse, the nomian aspect of what is called theosophical kabbalah is widely acknowledged in the emphasis placed on the theurgical task of unifying the ten sefirotic potencies through performance of the rituals.² In my judgement, the prophetic kabbalah developed by Abraham Abulafia and his disciples must also be classified as nomian insofar as ritual is transformed in this mystical praxis into a sacrament that facilitates psychic ascent and the ontic reintegration of the individual into the divine in an experience that is considered to be on a par with prophecy.³

To be sure, it cannot be denied that the experiences of mystical contemplation, visualization, or conjunction, and the techniques employed by kabbalists to attain them, can and often did exceed the strict requirements of the ritual and custom that constitute the body of halakhah. Nevertheless, I would argue that it is valid to view the eidetic form of these meditational exercises and the consequent paranormal states of consciousness that ensue therefrom as essentially nomian in character.⁴ This claim is predicated on two assumptions: First, the relevant practices and corresponding experiences are presented in kabbalistic texts in terms of specific ceremonial acts, particularly liturgical in nature. Second, many medieval kabbalists, as some of their philosophical counterparts, maintained unequivocally that the state of supreme felicity, the traditional hereafter identified as the goal of the mystical path, was

¹ My presentation reflects the approach of Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 126–7, regarding the mutual dependence of the values a particular culture holds (ethos) and the general order of existence within which it finds itself (worldview).

² For references, see Introduction, n. 52.

³ See Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, 178–228.

⁴ Consider the remarks of Twersky, 'Religion and Law'. As Twersky emphasizes, the 'true essence of halakhah and its ultimate consummation' is characterized by a struggle between 'prophecy and law, charisma and institution, mood and medium, image and reality, normative action and individual perception, objective determinacy and subjective ecstasy' (p. 70). Leaving aside the question of whether or not it is appropriate to speak of the 'true essence of halakhah', Twersky's description of the halakhic process certainly applies to medieval rabbinic culture. A consequence of the dialectical relationship between law and experience is that the spiritualizing dimension expressed in philosophic, kabbalistic, and pietistic works took shape within and significantly transformed the matrix of the halakhic system. On the complementary nature of halakhah, philosophy, and kabbalah, see also Ta-Shema, 'Halakhah, Kabbalah, and Philosophy'.

to be identified as well as the ultimate goal or purpose of the scripturally revealed commandments (*mišwot*). This is the case in the prophetic kabbalah of Abulafia and his followers, for whom, as I noted above, the mystical rationale for *mišwot* relates to the fact that they are the sign-gestures on the path that leads one to spiritual purification. The point is epitomized in Abulafia's kabbalistic interpretation of the dictum attributed to Rav, 'the commandments were given to purify human beings (*lešaref et ha-beriyot*)'.⁵ For the prophetic kabbalist, the dictum of Rav indicates that the commandments prepare one psychically and somatically to undertake the meditational practice of letter-combination (*šeruf ha-otiyot*), which culminates in the prophetic experience of intellectual conjunction, knowing the name, being incorporated into the light.⁶

In line with Maimonides, it would appear that Abulafia could not have limited the possibility of conjunction to the Jewish soul. Thus, for example, in one passage he asserts that the 'souls of the pious ones of the nations and the souls of the righteous ones of Israel are not bodies or bodily powers, but they are entirely separate intellects'.⁷ In another context, after discussing the difference in the Jewish tradition between the proper name (*shem ha-ešem*), which denotes essence, and the adjectival name (*shem ha-to'ar*), which denotes accidental attributes, Abulafia remarks that 'there is no doubt that in every language there can be found secrets of this matter, for the final intention of human existence is to attain felicity, and the ultimate felicity is knowledge of God, blessed be he, and on this the life of the world-to-come is dependent'.⁸

Ostensibly, it would seem reasonable to conclude that the goal to which fulfilment of traditional ritual leads, a state of blessedness designated by the traditional eschatological idiom 'world-to-come', is attainable equally by Jew and non-Jew. Yet, there are numerous passages wherein Abulafia categorically contrasts the ontic status of the Jew and non-Jew. In Chapter 1, I cited and analysed some passages from Abulafia's compositions to illustrate the point. Here it is important to reiterate that, in many of his works, Abulafia casts the distinction between Jew and non-Jew on grounds that only the former is capable of prophetic experience, which is portrayed as the conjunction of the human and divine intellects facilitated by the meditational praxis of letter-combination. The esoteric meaning presumably encoded in the reasons for

⁵ *Genesis Rabbah* 44: 1; *Leviticus Rabbah* 13: 3.

⁶ Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, 197–204.

⁷ *Hayyei ha-Olam ha-Ba*, MS Oxford, Bodleian Library 1582, fols. 4a–b (printed edn., p. 49).

⁸ *Hayyei ha-Nefesh*, MS Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek 408, fol. 37a (printed edn., p. 66).

the commandments (*ta'amei mišwot*) relates to this experience; indeed, the inner purpose of *mišwot* is understood to be the cultivation of the interior experience unique to the prophetic nation, an experience that relates to the status of Jews as the angelic ethnos who bear the unity of the threefold that characterizes the conjunctive moment—that is, the union of intellect (*sekhel*), the subject that intellectualizes (*maskkil*), and the object that is intellectualized (*muskkal*)—on their flesh in the form of the covenantal inscription.⁹ From this we may adduce that the kabbalistic orientation espoused by Abulafia reflects a somewhat split relationship to the religious philosophy enunciated by Maimonides on the one hand, appropriating the depiction of the ecstatic experience as a form of intellectual conjunction, but, on the other, limiting this experience to one ethnic group.

An analogous rationale for the commandments is offered by Abulafia's disciple Joseph Gikatilla: 'Every intelligent person (*ba'al sekhel*) should contemplate how great is the level of our pure Torah, which purifies the soul, for through the power of the ways of Torah the soul can ascend higher than the separate intellects, and, similarly, the one who contemplates the secret of the commandments.'¹⁰ A key difference between Abulafia and Gikatilla lies in the fact that for the former observance of commandments facilitates conjunction of the soul with the Active Intellect, whereas for the latter the goal is an ascent of the soul to a realm above the separate intellects. Notwithstanding this difference, both kabbalists viewed ceremonial practice as a means for the soul to attain a higher spiritual state by being conjoined to its ontic source beyond the material world. Commandments make possible the attainment of angelic embodiment, the aethereal garb donned by consciousness in the discarding of the material garb of the coarse body. The portrayal of law as that which promotes noetic conjunction, and the renunciation of corporeal desire that ensues therefrom, constitute the esoteric significance of the covenantal rites binding on the Jewish people. The purpose of the ritual, the inner, hidden intent that informs the external performance, even if in a secondary or subliminal way, is to cultivate the state of mind wherein all dualities are overcome in the coming-over of the other to the same, thereby rendering performance ultimately (a regulative as opposed to a temporal marking) unnecessary, not because the law is surpassed but because it is trespassed by

⁹ On the nexus between circumcision and the experience of intellectual conjunction depicted as the union of the threefold, *sekhel*, *maskkil*, and *muskkal*, see Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, 86–7.

¹⁰ *Ginnat Egoz*, 263. To date, scholars have paid attention to the theurgical interpretation of the commandments proffered by Gikatilla in his theosophic works. See esp. Mopsik, *Les Grands Textes*, s.v. Joseph Gikatilla.

the traces of its own meandering.¹¹ Therefore, there is no reason to presume any disjunction between law and the mystical path.¹²

This is certainly the case as well for kabbalists who viewed commandments principally as the means to unify the *sefirot*. The theurgical task presupposes the ecstatic unification of the individual and the potencies that collectively constitute the name YHWH.¹³ This unification occurs as a consequence of cleaving to the letters of the name, the inner essence of Torah. But only one who has mastered the body and conquered the sensual impulses can be conjoined to the name. It is reasonable to view the contemplative ideal in kabbalistic literature from the perspective of the Maimonidean notion that the Torah aims at the perfection of the body (*tiqqun ha-guf*) and the perfection of the soul (*tiqqun ha-nefesh*), the former serving as the necessary requirement to attain the latter, which is characterized further as the state of intellectual conjunction.¹⁴ Maimonides emphatically recognizes both ends as intrinsic to Torah, yet he is unequivocal regarding his belief that axiological priority be granted the perfection of the soul, for ‘commandments and prohibitions of the Law are only intended to quell all the impulses of matter’.¹⁵ While the philosophical sage (*hakham*) may not have assented to the interpretation of *mišwot* as a manifestation of the divine glory proffered by the enlightened master of esoteric lore (*ba‘al sod*), the former would have shared with the latter the spiritual understanding of *mišwot* as the means to facilitate the attainment of the elitist goal of conjunction. Both philosopher and kabbalist, moreover, would have insisted that *mišwot* also have a utilitarian benefit for all those who comply with them.

There is, of course, an important difference between kabbalists and philosophers on this score: the accusation of antinomianism, on both intellectual and practical grounds, was associated with philosophic figures beginning

¹¹ The significance of this orientation in the Jewish–Christian polemic may be gauged from the discussion of eschatological matters, the Garden of Eden (*gan eden*) and the world-to-come (*olam ha-ba*), in Ibn Shaprut, ‘*La Piedra de Toque*’, 1: 4, pp. 97–9. In response to the feigned, albeit stereotypical, claim of the Christian that traditional Jewish customs lack interior value, Ibn Shaprut emphasizes that the goal of engagement with Torah, both in practical and theoretical terms, is for ‘the soul to ascend and to delight in the spiritual paradise (*ti‘aneg be-gan eden ruhani*), and this delight (*ta’anug*) is spiritual, and corporeal’ (p. 97). He follows the philosophico-mystical notion that the ‘soul emanates from the universal intellect (*sekhel ha-kelali*), which is called by them the Active Intellect (*sekhel ha-po ‘el*)’ (p. 105).

¹² A similar argument is made with respect to the Šufi tradition by Ayoub, ‘Law and Grace in Islam’.

¹³ On the inseparability of the ecstatic and theurgic poles of experience, see Wolfson, ‘Forms’, 221, 225–7, 233. See also Idel, ‘Some Remarks’. Sensitivity to the convergence of the ecstatic and theurgic is also implied in the work of Pedaya, ‘“Possessed by Speech”’; id., *Vision and Speech*.

¹⁴ See Galston, ‘Purpose of the Law’, 35–47.

¹⁵ *Guide*, III. 8, p. 433.

already in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and continuing in later periods.¹⁶ The danger of philosophical antinomianism is captured succinctly in Judah Halevi's explanation of the apostasy of Elisha ben Abuyah in the legend of the four rabbis who entered Pardes: 'He repudiated the fulfilment of the commandments after he contemplated the intellects, saying in his heart, "The fulfilment of the commandments are but instruments and intermediaries that bring one to this spiritual level, and since I have already attained it, I have no need for the practical commandments".'¹⁷ Maimonides himself provides evidence for the charge of antinomianism from a different angle, for he acknowledges that the enterprise of discerning the reasons for the commandments could very well lead to negligence in fulfilling them.¹⁸ By contrast, kabbalists were generally perceived as espousing forms of piety that enhanced traditional ritual behaviour.¹⁹ Indeed, one of the factors that seemed to contribute to the literary proliferation of kabbalistic *ṭa'amei mišvot* in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries (especially during the period of the crystallization of zoharic literature) was an implicit and at times explicit reaction to philosophical antinomianism.²⁰ Even the antinomian tendencies, which were latent in some kabbalistic sources from this early period and fully actualized in the Sabbatian and Frankist heresies of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, stem from a nomian orientation. Tradition is refracted dialectically through its own negation, for the abrogation of law is viewed as the means to fulfil it. Conversely expressed, acceptance of law is realized in its eventual repudiation. To walk the path of halakhah one must trespass the limit of one's own expedition.

As we shall see, according to the Sabbatian visionaries, self-cancellation of law is related more specifically to the motif of the suffering messiah, the

¹⁶ On charges of antinomianism against medieval philosophical figures, see the discussion and relevant sources noted in Lawee, 'Path to Felicity', 194–8. See also Gross, *Iberian Jewry*, 83–6. For a similar phenomenon of a 'bookish' antinomianism in medieval Islam, i.e. a rejection of the law cultivated by philosophers and Ismaili theologians, see Crone, *God's Rule*, 207–11.

¹⁷ *Kuzari* III. 65; Twersky, *Introduction*, 393; Silman, *Philosopher and Prophet*, 81.

¹⁸ Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkhot Me'ilah* 8: 8; Twersky, *Introduction*, 407–8; id., 'Concerning Maimonides' Rationalization'. Twersky sharply contrasts the philosophical antinomianism, 'where knowledge may lead to laxity', and the 'skeptical' or 'agnostic antinomianism', where 'intellectual failure rather than intellectual attainment results in neglect'. This distinction is somewhat misleading, however, insofar as the philosophical impulse itself may lead to the agnostic position.

¹⁹ This is not to deny that on occasion kabbalists were attacked for espousing views and/or practices that struck a heretical chord. In spite of such occurrences, however, on the whole kabbalists were not branded with the label 'antinomian'. By contrast, this was one of the stereotypical depictions of the philosophical pursuit.

²⁰ See Wolfson, 'Mystical Rationalization', 222 (and the reference to the work of other scholars cited in n. 27 *ad loc.*), 249–51.

righteous saviour who must endure the travails of the corporeal world of darkness and alienation in order to rectify the primordial sin of Adam,²¹ which, following Lurianic kabbalah, was identified more specifically as the spilling of seed in vain that occasions the separation of male and female potencies within the Godhead.²² For our purposes at this juncture it is necessary to reiterate that the eschatological overturning of the distinction between permissible and forbidden in Sabbatian sources springs from the mystical insight of the underlying oneness of all reality, a sentiment expressed in much earlier kabbalistic texts.²³ The distinctive turn on the Sabbatian path—although even this has older textual roots—is the claim that to actualize that potentiality in God the earthly messiah had to delve into the depths of the unholy by performing ‘strange acts’. Significantly, the association of Islam (or Ishmael) and the serpent from previous sources, most importantly passages in zoharic literature, influenced Sabbatian theologians.²⁴ Hence, the apostasy signified the trespassing of the line separating Israel and the nations, the true God and false gods, transforming the inclusive exclusivity into an exclusive inclusivity. When viewed from the eschatological perspective, transgression is itself an expression of piety. The righteous one must endure darkness as an integral part of light rather than as something in opposition to it, and thus the rigid boundary between sacred and mundane cannot be maintained.

The nomian framework, by contrast, is predicated on a clear distinction between the permissible and forbidden, the holy and impure, Israel and the nations. At one level, the mystical experience of the divine promulgated in kabbalistic theosophy reinforces this dichotomous orientation, for the Godhead itself is divided into polar opposites, the left side of judgement (valenced as female) and the right side of mercy (valenced as male). The unity of God is experienced and expressed as the mediation or balance of these two sides. In the words of one zoharic passage that formulates the unity of divine mercy and judgement in terms of the ideal of containment of left in right, evil in

²¹ The roots for this approach to ‘original sin’ can be found in older kabbalistic sources. See reference in Ch. 2, n. 69.

²² See Ch. 1, n. 284.

²³ The claim of Dan, *On Sanctity*, 73, that expressions of ‘radical antinomianism’ in Jewish history (including Sabbatianism) ‘were not based on mystical experience, but on a direct historical-communicative orientation’, is a generalization that is not defensible in the case of antinomian (or hypernomian) tendencies expressed in kabbalistic literature, which are clearly rooted in certain ontological assumptions that stem from an experiential foundation (my use of the term ‘ontological’ follows the Heideggerian tradition wherein ontology always entails an experiential component, for access to being comes by way of intimate experience). This is especially so in the case of the Sabbatian phenomenon, as Scholem and others have duly noted.

²⁴ See Ch. 1, n. 462, and Ch. 2, n. 53.

good: 'If you want to understand and to know that the "Lord is God" (Deut. 4: 39), "consider it in your hearts" (ibid.) and then you will know it. "Your hearts", the good inclination and the evil inclination, for the one is contained in the other, and they are one, and then you will find the "Lord is God", for the one is contained in the other and they are one.'²⁵ In spite of the recognition enunciated in this passage concerning the ultimate identity of right and left, good and evil, in the social plane the normative ritualistic assumptions are operative, for just as the divine form is ontically divided into left and right, feminine judgement and masculine mercy, so the Jewish community should be regulated axiologically by the division into what is permissible and what is forbidden. Indeed, for any number of kabbalists, the basic division of biblical commandments according to rabbinic jurisprudence, the 248 prescriptions and the 365 prohibitions, has its ontological root in the divine attributes that correspond respectively to the left side and the right side. Ritualistically, all men and women are obligated in negative commandments and in positive commandments that are not dependent on time, whereas only men are obligated in positive commandments that are dependent on time. Accordingly, in the symbolic interpretation of ritual adopted by kabbalists, the positive is associated with the male and the negative with the female.²⁶

This portrayal of the divine, which is found already in one of the earliest medieval kabbalistic compositions, the commentary on Song of Songs by Ezra of Gerona,²⁷ is well expressed by Meir Ibn Gabbai, whose words are based in great measure on a passage from Gikatilla's *Sha'arei Orah*:²⁸

It is known to sages of truth that the Written Torah is comprised of the right and left, for the name of the Lord is the mystery of *Tif'eret Yisrae'l*, which is in the middle comprised of right and left, and this is the reason that it comprises positive commandments and negative commandments. . . . The Torah is the principle of the great supernal Adam, and thus it comprises 248 positive commandments and 365 negative commandments like the number of limbs and sinews of the lower and the supernal Adam. An allusion to this is [the verse] 'This is my name forever and this is my appellation [for all eternity]' (Exod. 3: 15), 'my name' (*shemi*) together with [the first two letters of the Tetragrammaton] *yod-he* equals 365, 'my appellation' (*zikhri*) together with [the last two letters of the Tetragrammaton] *waw-he* equals 248.²⁹ Thus the unique name (*shem ha-meyuḥad*) is the principle of all the Torah, and the Torah is woven from the name YHWH, and it is verily the name. Since the Torah is the

²⁵ *Zohar* 2: 26b.

²⁶ See *Book of the Pomegranate*, 64–6 (English introduction).

²⁷ Ezra of Gerona, *Perush Shir ha-Shirim*, 496–7. See Mopsik, *Les Grands Textes*, 115–24.

²⁸ Gikatilla, *Sha'arei Orah*, 1: 249.

²⁹ This exegetical strategy is employed by the anonymous author of *Ra'aya Meheimna* and *Tiqunei Zohar*. See Tishby, *Wisdom*, 1101.

form of Adam, it is appropriate for the human (*adam*), and through it the human is human and in the end he will be conjoined to the [divine] Adam.³⁰

The mystical conception of Torah is predicated on the identification of the latter with the Tetragrammaton, which is imaged as well in the form of an anthropos, the limbs and sinews of which consist of 613 commandments.³¹ One of the major implications of the structural classification of the positive and negative commandments is the presumption that adherence to the normative tradition provides the means by which the kabbalist (or any pious Jew with the right intention) theurgically unifies left and right, symbolically imaged as the masculine and feminine energies of the divine, the potency that bestows and the power that receives. The anthropomorphic shape of Torah also provides the mechanism by which the observant Jew below fully realizes his human potential, for by observing the commandments he is conjoined to the supernal anthropos, which is comprised of the letters of the name. This one textual example points to a larger point that has been somewhat obfuscated by the typological distinction between ecstatic and theurgic kabbalah in contemporary scholarship: the mystical goal of conjunction and the theurgical task of reunification cannot be easily separated in the lived experience that has informed kabbalistic symbolism.

It follows that for kabbalists the axiological framework of the law—the perspective from which one who adheres to a particular system of belief and action makes value judgements with regard to the nature of being as a whole—is grounded in the structure of the Godhead. The extreme, and in some sense rigid, sense of duality is accentuated in those kabbalistic sources (for example, the zoharic anthology and the Lurianic corpus) wherein the divine is set over and against the demonic, represented mythically as the struggle between the holy One and Samael. To be sure, the latter is rooted ontically in the former, for kabbalists uniformly eschew an absolute metaphysical dualism.³² The point is articulated in the following zoharic passage:

Praiseworthy is the portion of Moses, the faithful prophet. What is written concerning him? ‘The angel of the Lord appeared to him in a blazing fire out of a bush’ (Exod. 3: 2). The bush verily was within and conjoined to the holiness, for everything is conjoined, one to the other, purity and impurity. There is no purity except from within impurity. And this mystery [is related in the verse] ‘Who will produce a pure thing from something impure?’ (Job 14: 4). The shell and the core ascend one within the other, and this shell is not removed or broken until the time that the dead rise from the dust.

³⁰ *Avodat ha-Qodesh*, pt. 1, ch. 21, p. 48.

³¹ See Scholem, *On the Kabbalah*, 37–50; Wolfson, ‘Mystical Rationalization’, 231–5. On the relationship between the body and commandments, see also Morris, ‘Embodied Text’.

³² Scholem, *Mystical Shape*, 56–87; Tishby, *Wisdom*, 450–8; Wolfson, ‘Left Contained’.

Then the shell will be broken and the light will shine in the world from within the core without concealment.³³

Ontologically, the core and the shell are one—indeed, ‘there is no purity except from within impurity’—but, functionally, demonic impurity is to be kept distinct from the realm of holiness and thus the hedge separating Jew and non-Jew ideally should not be breached—a temperament well rooted in the textual landscape of Jewish pietism, stretching at least as far back as the priestly runaways from Jerusalem, the priests seeking to construct a priestly ritual outside the confines of the temple, probably as early as the Hasmonean period. In great measure, this became a central motif in later rabbinic literature. The sacredness of kabbalistic ritual, in line with the halakhic orientation of medieval rabbinic culture, is predicated on preserving the integrity of the social order by drawing the boundaries necessary to prevent intrusion of external or alien forces.³⁴ As noted in the concluding section of the previous chapter, one of the remarkable aspects of the Sabbatian and Frankist movements in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is precisely the fact that this hedge was significantly breached and the boundaries between Jew and other were rendered more fluid, a fluidity that expressed itself either in terms of actual conversion or as the appropriation of ‘external’ symbols and modes of discourse to articulate the ‘internal’ Jewish faith. I will return to this point later on, but suffice it here to say that even these more extreme forms of crossing boundaries do not challenge the claim I made with respect to the nomian framework and the necessary division between Jew and non-Jew. On the contrary, careful scrutiny of the ostensibly heretical messianic material indicates that the change in identity stems from the faith that the integrity of the different religions is preserved even as the borders separating them are traversed.

Here it would be beneficial to recall the following remark of René Girard: ‘The ritualistic mind is perhaps more willing than we are to admit that good and evil are simply two aspects of the same reality, but eventually it must distinguish between them; even in the ritualistic framework, where there are fewer differences than in any other area of human culture, a distinction between the two must be apparent.’³⁵ Kabbalistic interpretations of the commandments have consistently reflected this approach, and even in Sabbatian sources, as I will argue in more detail towards the conclusion of this chapter, the violating of boundary is predicated on preserving the very

³³ *Zohar* 2: 69b.

³⁴ See Paden, ‘Sacrality as Integrity’.

³⁵ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 115. The specific context whence Girard’s comment has been elicited is the discussion of good (that is, sacrificial) and bad violence.

boundary that is to be violated. No matter how emphatically the kabbalist insisted on the monistic ideal of the containment of the demonic in the divine, based ultimately on the insight concerning the absolute oneness of all things in the unity of the Infinite, the religious task was to keep these two domains distinct in the social realm. For example, the authorship of *Zohar* can argue that the force of Edom derives from the same source as that of Israel—indeed the interrelatedness of the impure and the holy is underscored by the fact that Esau and Jacob were twins in the womb of Rebekah—but they would not advocate that the decisive union of Edom and Israel be enacted by the Jewish male engaging in sexual intercourse with the Christian woman or by ingesting a ritually impure item such as pork. The metaphysical claim of the underlying unity of all being does not translate into the abolition of the interdictions in traditional Jewish society, which maintain the boundaries separating holiness from impurity, the people of Israel and other nations.

IMITATIO DEI: ONTOLOGIZING THE ETHICAL IDEAL

In a previous study I suggested that the formation of the idea of wisdom (*ḥokhmah*) in the later redactional strata of *Sefer ha-Bahir* is predicated on the moral depiction of the divine reality, which is typified by the symbolic portrayal of the patriarchs as the attributes of loving-kindness (*hesed*), judgement (*din*), and mercy (*raḥamim*). To know these attributes implicates one in the imitation of God's qualities, which are correlated with moral categories.³⁶ Alternatively expressed, from the kabbalists' perspective gnosis and praxis are not separable, for if one does not act in a certain way as a consequence of one's insight, this is a sure sign that the insight does not stem from inner illumination, a sense of clarity. The pattern that I discerned in a rudimentary fashion in the bahiric composition can certainly be extended to subsequent medieval kabbalistic texts wherein the symbolic depiction of the *sefirot* likewise is predicated, in part, on an ontologizing of ethical virtues. The pietistic task from this perspective entails a form of *imitatio dei*, the emulation of moral traits attributed to the very nature of God.

I will illustrate the point from the specific example of zoharic literature. Isaiah Tishby, unquestionably one of the leading scholars of *Zohar* in the twentieth century, remarked that this work is to be characterized by a 'divorce

³⁶ Wolfson, 'Hebraic and Hellenic', 168–72. The fuller implication of my position would challenge the view expressed concerning the separation of mysticism and ethics in early kabbalistic literature. See Dan, *Jewish Mysticism and Jewish Ethics*, 76; and the reference to Tishby cited in the next note.

of kabbalistic mysticism from ethical doctrines'.³⁷ If we measure the appropriateness of the term 'ethical' by the criterion of universal applicability, then I would certainly agree with Tishby's assessment insofar as the anthropological conception that one may elicit from this corpus smacks of an ethnocentrism that is expressed in its most extreme form as demonization of the other. The use of the term by Tishby, however, is not so restricted, and it is not on account of such a consideration that he concluded that ethics is not an integral part of the kabbalistic worldview put forth in *Zohar*. According to Tishby, the term 'ethical' denotes acts of pious devotion and moral righteousness expressed on the ontological, cosmological, and psychological planes. If we limit the use of the term 'ethical' in this way, it can be argued, contra Tishby, that the theosophy of zoharic literature, and that of kabbalah more generally, is unintelligible unless one assumes a corroboration of ethics and mysticism, that is, there is an intrinsically ethical dimension to the divine potencies, which serve as the object of the kabbalist's visionary contemplation. To express the matter differently, the theosophical orientation propounded in zoharic literature is predicated on the assumption that the kabbalist's ability to relate to God is through imitating divine attributes valorized in terms of the rudimentary division of being into the polarities of good and evil, light and dark, right and left, Israel and the nations, an idea often linked exegetically to the verse *zeh le'ummat zeh asah ha-elohim*, 'God made one corresponding to the other' (Eccles. 7: 14). The issue of morality, therefore, is not a peripheral concern in *Zohar* or in related kabbalistic texts; on the contrary, it is integral to theosophic speculation and practice.

This orientation is expressed succinctly by Cordovero in the proclamation that begins the first chapter of *Tomer Devorah*:

A person must make himself similar to his Creator and then he will be in the mystery of the supernal form (*ha-šurah ha-elyonah*), the image and likeness. If he imitates [the divine] in his body and not in his actions, he falsifies the form . . . for the essence of the supernal image and likeness is his actions, and what good will it do him to be like the supernal form in the likeness of the structure of his limbs, but not like the Creator in his actions?³⁸

In the remainder of the treatise, Cordovero presents a systematic delineation of the moral and religious actions that correspond to each of the ten sefirot gradations. According to Cordovero, the *sefirot* are configured and aligned with the human person in the following pattern: intellect, will, thought, speech, action, and the powers of the body. By performing the actions that

³⁷ Tishby, *Wisdom*, 1329–30.

³⁸ *Tomer Devorah*, ch. 1, p. 15. See Mopsik's discussion of the ontic resemblance of the human being to God and the ideal of *imitatio dei* in *Le Palmier de Débora*, 30–41.

correspond to the appropriate potencies, one imitates the actions of the imaginal body of God and is bound thereby to the supernal holiness. In order to occasion this state of mystical conjunction, which is presented by Cordovero as the telos of the pious path, the person must know which of the divine gradations rules at a particular time, so that he may be bound to it in order to accomplish the particular rectification (*tiqqun*). He who conducts himself in this manner lives in a state of ecstatic union with the divine Presence, which is portrayed more specifically in the concluding passage of the treatise in the image of his head being crowned by *Shekhinah*.³⁹ The act of imitating God's attributes, the way that facilitates the mystical state of communion, is connected, moreover, to the theurgical task of influencing the sefirotic emanations.

The accord of the mystical and theurgical elements is made clear in the opening comment of the first draft of *Tomer Devorah*, which has been published from manuscript: 'Concerning the action of man and his advantage with respect to the light or the emanation of the supernal beings: he shakes the supernal worlds, and he is a chariot for the *sefirot*.'⁴⁰ The image of shaking the worlds above indicates the theurgical capacity of the individual to influence the divine, whereas the image of man being a chariot for the emanations signifies the mystical bond that connects human and divine. Cordovero's remark points to a fundamental insight in the kabbalistic tradition that has been largely missed by the debate regarding the issue of the primacy of magic over mysticism or that of mysticism over magic.⁴¹ In the religious orientation of kabbalists, the two are inseparable. The way up and the way down are truly one and the same, for mystical ascent to the divine results in the magical drawing down of the divine.⁴²

³⁹ *Tomer Devorah*, ch. 10, p. 65.

⁴⁰ Sack, "First Version", 171.

⁴¹ The strongest advocate for reading Cordovero in a 'magical' as opposed to 'theosophic' light is Idel, *Hasidism*, 67–74.

⁴² This insight runs to the core of kabbalistic speculation, as is attested from some of the earliest Provençal and Geronese documents that present the mystical idea of *devequt*, conjunction with God, which is facilitated by the proper intention (*kawwanah*) in prayer. For a richly nuanced discussion of the idea of *kawwanah* in the early kabbalists, see Scholem, *Origins*, 299–309. In a previous study, 'Concept of the Kavvanah', 169–70, Scholem clearly noted the importance of understanding the kabbalistic notion of intentionality as a confluence of the mystical and magical, even though the former implied negation of the will and the latter assertion of the will. More revealing than what Scholem calls the 'magical' is what scholars today would refer to as the 'theurgical,' i.e. the presumption that one has the ability to impact the nature of the divine through one's mystical intentions. The early kabbalists emphasize, time and again, that the conjunction of the soul with the divine facilitates the opening of the supernal fountain and the consequent overflow of light, which sustains the lower worlds. The blending of the mystical and theurgical is appreciated in the analysis of Brody, 'Human

TRANSMORAL HYPERNOMIANISM/ETHICAL SUSPENSION

The use of the term 'ethical' may be employed to characterize the ontological pattern applied to the luminous potencies of God, a pattern based on the fissure of divine energy into polar opposites. According to the arresting image of one zoharic passage, the scales of deception and the scales of truth together make up the balance of justice.⁴³ Beyond this division, however, the kabbalistic symbolism brings one to a point of unity wherein the thing becomes its opposite since opposites originate in the same source.⁴⁴ Reflecting this element of the tradition uniformly affirmed by kabbalists, Isaac of Acre briefly put the matter, 'light and dark emanate from one entity'.⁴⁵ If light and dark emanate from one entity are they not identical at root? Alternatively expressed, if God is truly the all-encompassing one, what other side could there be? Is it not the case that in the non-differentiated singularity of the absolute, left must be right, right left, Esau Jacob, and Jacob Esau? Would the monistic potentiality of mystical experience not defy the dualistic framework necessitated by any ethical system? Would the convergence of mysticism and morality not entail an inversion of values that lifts one beyond the dichotomy of good and evil, permissible and forbidden, a non-dual state wherein deception and truth would be indistinguishable?⁴⁶

Hands', 133–53. The insight regarding the inseparability of the mystical and magical was articulated from another vantage-point by Butler, *Ritual Magic*, 39–40, reacting to the effort of Moses Gaster to distinguish kabbalah from sorcery: 'The line drawn here between the white Kabbalist and the black magician is as arbitrary as all attempted classifications of magic are doomed to be; white and black are continually mingling and fertilizing each other; and the ineffable names of the Kabbala were used and misused by the magical confraternity quite as profusely as those of the divinities of Egypt, Greece and Christendom. The holier the names, the more powerful they were supposed to be; and even the divine appellations of the Kabbalistic *Sephiroth* did not escape magical pollution.'

⁴³ *Zohar* 2: 95b.

⁴⁴ The centrality of this notion in the kabbalistic orientation may be gauged from a suggestion of Scholem, 'New Document', 155, that a remark of Isaac the Blind concerning the mystery of the terms *hillul* (praise) and *hillul* (profanation) may allude to the 'secret of two opposites in one subject . . . and it seems to me that here there is a hint to a common source of the powers of construction (*binyan*) and destruction (*harisah*), the right and left emanation, and this source is linked to the aspect that is called 'his holiness' (*qodsho*). On the harmonious unity of good and evil in the world of emanation according to the teaching of Isaac the Blind, see also Scholem, *Origins*, 293.

⁴⁵ Isaac ben Samuel of Acre, 'Commentary of R. Isaac', 391.

⁴⁶ The coincidence of opposites and the consequent collapsing of the distinction between moral antinomies is affirmed, for instance, in the logic of the middle way expounded in Mahāyāna Buddhism, a logic that is rooted in the experience of enlightenment, the purification of mind from all discrimination. See e.g. the directive offered by the goddess to Shariputra in

Interestingly, in his discussion of the conception of the image of God in Ḥayyim of Volozhyn's *Nefesh ha-Ḥayyim*, Levinas gives voice to the 'temptation to go above the ethical' on the part of the mystic attuned to the oneness of the Infinite in which all things are contained to the point that opposites are identical in virtue of their difference:

The notion of *En-Sof* is thus the perfection of the Torah, freed from the worlds whose incatenation and hierarchy its legalism presupposes through the plain meaning of the text. Is everything pure for the person who has reached that far? Must we go as far as this liberation, as to the height of the religious? Must we lay stress on the elevation above the Law and ethics from out of the Law, as on the very dynamism of the Torah?... The spiritualism beyond all difference that would come from creature means, for man, the indifference of nihilism. All is equal in the omnipresence of God. All is divine. All is permitted. But God who is everywhere, excluding differences from creature, is also God who is nowhere. On its own, the thought of *En-Sof*, of the Infinite, the height of religiosity, is also its abyss. The thought of *En-Sof*, when it is fully understood, leading outside and beyond the Torah... is the impossibility of the religious idea of God.⁴⁷

One of the earliest expressions of this orientation on the part of kabbalists is found in Ezra of Gerona's introduction to his commentary on the Song of Songs, wherein he reconstructs the chain of tradition (*shalsholet ha-qabbalah*) in an effort to justify the composition of a written text in which he will openly disclose esoteric matters. The chain begins with the creation of Adam and Eve and continues through the course of Jewish history until the moment that Ezra composed his treatise. What is significant for our purposes is his account of the Sinaitic theophany. Following rabbinic precedent, which is based, in turn, on several key scriptural verses,⁴⁸ Ezra emphasizes the ocularcentric aspect of the experience—'in this holy gathering Israel saw the glory of *Shekhinah* eye to eye'—but he interprets the visual component in terms of the kabbalistic ideal of theosophic knowledge. 'In that gathering, Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, the seventy elders of Israel, and all of Israel comprehended the knowledge of his truth and the essence of his glory, each and every one in accord with his perfection, potentiality, and power.'⁴⁹ Utilizing a theme

Vimalakirti Sutra, 87: 'One must be without distinctions to be in accordance with the Law.' See also Broughton, *Bodhidharma Anthology*, 14: 'How could there be good and evil, false and correct? Even arising is no-arising, even extinguishing is no-extinguishing. Moving is no-moving, concentration is no-concentration.' See *ibid.*, 32: 'The bodhisattva examines the fact that every locus is the locus of Dharma. The bodhisattva does not reject any locus, does not seize any locus, does not select any locus, and makes all of them into Buddha events. Birth-and-death is made into a Buddha event, and delusion is made into a Buddha event.'

⁴⁷ Levinas, *Beyond the Verse*, 166.

⁴⁸ See the textual evidence adduced by Chernus, *Mysticism*, 1–32; Sommer, 'Revelation'.

⁴⁹ Ezra of Gerona, *Perush Shir ha-Shirim*, 478.

affirmed in older midrashic sources,⁵⁰ Ezra asserts that each one of the Israelites present at Sinai experienced the epiphany of God from his or her own perspective.

In the continuation of the passage Ezra provides more detail regarding the content of the revelatory experience. 'From this true knowledge the holy Torah was given, and it emerged from the inner voice, and this voice divided into seventy branches, which correspond to the seventy faces of Torah, and the faces change and are transmuted to every side, from impure to pure, from forbidden to permissible, from ritually unfit to ritually fit, "the one corresponding to the other" (Eccles. 7: 14), and through it one could understand the impurity of the creeping thing and its purity.'⁵¹ The revelation of Torah is interpreted in light of the knowledge of God's being, which constitutes the essence of kabbalah. Indeed, as Ezra himself affirms elsewhere, in its mystical valence the dual Torah revealed at Sinai (according to rabbinic lore) is symbolically correlated with the androgynous nature of the divine glory: Written Torah corresponds symbolically to the masculine potency, *Tif'eret*, and Oral Torah to the feminine, *Malkhut*.⁵² This is the import of the claim that Torah was 'given' or revealed from the 'true knowledge' of God's being, that is, Torah itself denotes the hypostatic potency that is the primary object of theosophic gnosis. It is likely that the 'inner voice' (*qol penimi*) is a symbolic reference to the third of the emanations, *Binah*,⁵³ whence derive the lower seven *sefirot*, associated here with seventy branches of the voice or seventy facets of Torah, for each of the seven potencies comprise ten within itself, yielding the sum of seventy. The seven lower potencies are contained within the third and seventh, *Tif'eret* and *Malkhut*, King and Matrona, brother and sister, the first six *sefirot* in the former, which is complemented and completed by the latter.⁵⁴ This may be viewed as a theosophic reworking of the rabbinic myth of the Sinaitic origin of Torah in its dual aspect.

Ezra's kabbalistic interpretation of the theophanic experience, however, is based on two other ideas expressed in rabbinic literature: on the one hand, the notion that the word spoken by God splintered into seventy languages (in some sources explicitly connected to the seventy nations),⁵⁵ and on the other,

⁵⁰ *Midrash Tanhuma*, Shemot, 25; *Exodus Rabbah* 2: 9.

⁵¹ Ezra of Gerona, *Perush Shir ha-Shirim*, 478.

⁵² See the commentary of Ezra to Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 8b, in Azriel of Gerona, *Commentary on Talmudic Aggadah*, 3, and parallel in *Liqutei Shikhehah u-Fe'ah*, 1b.

⁵³ The identification of *Binah* as the locus of the Sinaitic revelation is implicit in *Book Bahir*, § 74, p. 163.

⁵⁴ An echo of the kabbalistic tradition regarding the revelation of Torah through seven voices, which correspond to the visible luminous emanations, is found in *ibid.*, §29, p. 133. See Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*, 347–8.

⁵⁵ Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 88b; *Midrash Tanhuma*, Shemot, 25; *Exodus Rabbah* 28: 4.

the belief (attested only in relatively late sources) that there are seventy possible meanings in each word of Torah.⁵⁶ These views are merged with another rabbinic idea: since there can be only one source of revelation—there is only one God—the Torah must encompass all interpretative perspectives; indeed, even opposing reasons offered by future scholars to render something permissible or forbidden must be included in the original revelation. Two formulations of this idea are especially significant for understanding the citation from Ezra. The first occurs in a passage in the Tosefta wherein the term *ba'alei asuppot* (Eccles. 12: 11) is applied to the sages on account of their sitting in groups (*asufot*) debating whether a matter is pure or impure: 'A person should not say to himself, "Since some of them prohibit and others permit, why should I learn?"'⁵⁷ It has been taught 'they were by one shepherd' (Eccles. 12: 11), one shepherd received them and one God created them. You, too, must make your heart like an inner chamber⁵⁸ and enter into it the words of those who make it impure and the words of those who make it pure.'⁵⁹ The sages whose opinion is preserved in this text were sensitive to the fact that the mutual authority and legitimacy granted to opposing viewpoints, one that permits and the other that prohibits, might dissuade a student from learning. If opposing positions are evenly valid, why bother arguing the case one way to the exclusion of the other? Their response is an unequivocal affirmation of the exegetical process: just as one shepherd, Moses, received words of Torah from one God who created them, so the student must turn his heart into an inner chamber to receive opposing viewpoints. Indeed, as noted above, the

⁵⁶ *Numbers Rabbah* 13: 15.

⁵⁷ In the reworking of this passage in Babylonian Talmud, *Ḥagigah* 3*b*, the formulation reads: 'Perhaps a person would say, "How am I going to learn Torah from now on?"' The shift from 'why' to 'how' is noteworthy. Note also the shift in the version preserved in *Avot de-Rabbi Natan*, version A, ch. 18, p. 68: 'Perhaps a person will say to you, "I will sit and not study.'" Schechter, *ibid.*, n. 16, surmises, correctly in my opinion, that this section is an interpolation. For another version, see *Pesiqta Rabbati*, 3: 5, p. 23: 'Since this one says one reason and this one says another reason, perhaps their words will disappear.'

⁵⁸ Literally, 'chamber of chambers', *ḥadrei ḥadarim*. This term occurs infrequently in classical rabbinic literature. One such occurrence is worthy of citation. In *Midrash Mishle*, 8, p. 58, we read: "Listen for I speak noble things; uprightness comes from my lips" (Prov. 8: 6). What are the noble things (*negidim*)? Things they tell you (*maggidim*) about purity and impurity, prohibition and permission. And what is 'uprightness comes from my lips'? Words that open up for you the inner chamber in heaven and also matters hidden in the depth. Wisdom has two faces, one that deals with the halakhic category of opposites, permitted and forbidden, and the other that deals with secrets matters above and below. On the attribution of multiple chambers, *ḥadrei ḥadarim*, to Torah and the sages, see *Seder Eliyahu Rabbah*, 6, p. 100. For the use of the term to denote a place hidden from public view, see Babylonian Talmud, *Beṣah* 9*a*.

⁵⁹ Tosefta, *Soṭah* 7: 12. My thanks to Professor David Weiss-Halivni who recalled this passage when I taught the text of Ezra of Gerona at the retreat for Fellows of the American Academy of Jewish Research, held at the Center for Judaic Studies, University of Pennsylvania, June 4–6, 2000.

sages' title *ba'alei asuppot* conveys the image of sitting in groups wherein they debated the purity or impurity of a given matter. The student who participates in this hermeneutical enterprise emulates the posture of the Torah scholar.

The second passage that informed Ezra's text is from *Pesiqta Rabbati*, which appears to be a reworking of a text from the Palestinian Talmud:⁶⁰

R. Tanḥum bar Ḥanilai said, 'Had the Torah been given in clear-cut decisions (*ḥatukhah*), no teacher would have a leg to stand on when he instructs, for if he renders something impure, there are those who render it impure, and similarly if he renders something pure, there are those who render it pure.' R. Yanai said, 'The Torah that the holy One, blessed be he, gave to Moses was given in forty-nine aspects of purity and forty-nine aspects of impurity. Whence [do we know]? [It is written] "his banner of love was over me" (Song 2: 4). He [Moses] said to him [God], "How is the matter accomplished?" He said to him, "If the majority render something impure, it is impure; if the majority render something pure, it is pure."' ⁶¹

The pericope is redacted within a series of explications of the expression 'face to face', *panim be-fanim*, in the verse 'Face to face the Lord spoke to you on the mountain out of the fire' (Deut. 5: 4). The word 'face', accordingly, denotes hermeneutical aspect. What, then, is the meaning of 'face to face'? This expression refers to the forty-nine aspects of purity and forty-nine aspects of impurity through which Torah was revealed to Moses. Interestingly, the exegetical strategy employed to uphold the idea is numerology. The Hebrew for the expression 'his banner', *we-diglo*, in the verse 'his banner of love was over me', numerically equals forty-nine. 'His banner' thus alludes to the forty-nine aspects of purity and the forty-nine aspects of impurity. If both purity and impurity are credible judgements with regard to a particular issue, how is one to decide ultimately on a course of action? The operative procedural principle is democratic in nature: majority opinion is to be followed. Pragmatically a decision to go one way must be taken, but theoretically the opposite position is equally justified.

Ezra has blended together these different rabbinic motifs in his theosophic interpretation of the Sinaitic revelation and altered some critical details. At this historical juncture, the Israelites—and not simply Moses—comprehended that laws of Torah can be legitimately explicated in one of two ways, an exegetical posture that appears logically to be contradictory. Furthermore, he shifts the number of interpretative aspects from forty-nine to seventy even though the conceptual point is left intact. Going beyond the hermeneutical presumption of the rabbinic sources that there is only one divine authority and hence the scriptural text must support opposing perspectives, Ezra assumes

⁶⁰ Palestinian Talmud, Sanhedrin 4: 2, 22a.

⁶¹ *Pesiqta Rabbati*, 21: 14–15, pp. 450–3.

there is a convergence of opposites. That is, it is not only the case that reasons for purity and impurity mutually derive from one divine origin, but that in this origin the two are identical and consequently interchangeable. This is the import of Ezra's remark that the 'faces change and are transmuted to every side, from impure to pure, from forbidden to permissible, from ritually unfit to ritually fit, "the one corresponding to the other" (Eccles. 7: 14), and through it one could understand the impurity of the creeping thing and its purity'. Following yet another rabbinic dictum,⁶² the very same being, the 'creeping thing', can be determined as either pure or impure, for in their supernal essence purity and impurity are indistinguishable. In the oneness of the Godhead, opposites are the same by the very reason they are opposites.⁶³ The unity of God imposes a coincidence of opposites that defies the linear logic of the excluded middle.

In kabbalistic texts we do indeed find descriptions of the Infinite, or even of the first of the emanations, in language that is non-dual and thus requires one to transcend the epistemological categories of everyday experience. For instance, in some relatively early sources the unity of God is described by the expression *aḥdut ha-shaweh*, the 'equanimous one', which conveys the idea that divine oneness comprehends everything in a simple and indivisible unity. Equanimity (*hishttawut*) signifies the convergence of opposites in a perfect synthesis.⁶⁴ Typical of this approach is the description of the first of the ten *sefirot* offered by the fifteenth-century kabbalist Shem Ṭov Ibn Shem Ṭov, which is based on material that can be dated to the thirteenth century:⁶⁵ 'They called it the concealed light (*ha-or ha-mit'alle*) that receives every kind of change and permutation like a mirror that has no form and in which all

⁶² Babylonian Talmud, Eruvin 13b.

⁶³ The logic of the kabbalistic orientation bears similarity to the notion of the purity and freedom of the Godhead in Schelling's *Die Weltalter*. See Schelling, *Ages of the World*, 74: 'But precisely because the Godhead is whole and undivided, the eternal Yes and the eternal No, the Godhead is again neither one nor the other, but the unity of both. This is not an actual trinity of separately located principles, but here the Godhead is as the One, and precisely because it is the One, it is both the No and the Yes and the unity of both. In this Yes and that No lies that repulsion and attraction And in this attracting and repelling, the Godhead intensifies itself into the unity of both, that is, into the highest consciousness. Precisely because the Godhead is eternal freedom, it can only comport itself with respect to Being as the No, as the Yes, and as the unity of both.'

⁶⁴ For the background of this term in thirteenth-century kabbalah, especially in the Iyyun material, see Scholem, *Origins*, 439, n. 174; Verman, *Books of Contemplation*, 39, n. 10. Consider the depiction of Eden, which stands for *Hokhmah* as it receives from the infinite source, as a 'thing and its opposite' (*davar we-hofkho*) in Asher ben David's *Sefer ha-Yihud*, in R. Asher ben David: *His Complete Works*, 76.

⁶⁵ For instance, in the thirteenth-century work *Ma'yan ha-Hokhmah*, MS Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica ebr. 236, fol. 24b, the primordial flame is described as being 'in the font until the point that there is no comprehension and no measure to the light that is concealed in the surplus of the darkness (*orah ha-mit'allet be-tosefet ha-ḥosekeh*)'. See *ibid.*, fols. 27b–28a:

forms are seen. It is the secret of all opposites, and Moses our master, may peace be upon him, attempted to contemplate it but he was not given permission at all.⁶⁶ The depiction of the primal source as a *coincidentia oppositorum* is expressed poignantly in a passage from *Zohar*, which I have had the occasion to cite in a number of my studies:

R. Isaac said: When the holy One, blessed be he, created the world and wanted to reveal depth out of hiddenness,⁶⁷ and light from within darkness, they were contained in one another. . . . All things were contained one within the other, good inclination and evil inclination, right and left, Israel and the nations, white and black. All things were dependent on one another.⁶⁸

Here we have clearly traversed the realm of being wherein the polarity conducive to standard moral judgement is operative. The moment in the divine economy described by R. Isaac is beyond good and evil. The normal dichotomies that regulate the kabbalist's demeanour, the moral distinction between good and evil, the spatial distinction between right and left, the ethno-religious distinction between Israel and the nations, and the perceptual distinction between white and black, all dissolve in the oneness of the Infinite. The transcendence of the dyadic in Ein Sof, the One that has not yet become one for in becoming one it would be two,⁶⁹ poses a major challenge to moral thinking based on a clear and distinct separation of opposites. The very ground for the kabbalist's ethical and religious position in the world would seem to be undermined by the insight that in the Infinite good and evil are

'From the primordial darkness . . . comes forth the existence of everything, and from it issues the spring . . . and it is called the light that is darkened from light (*or ha-nehshakh me-or*) . . . for it is concealed, and it is impossible for the essence of the being of this darkness to be known. Therefore, it is called the darkness that darkens . . . for no creature can gaze upon it, even the angels that sit first in the kingdom of heaven. . . . The marvellous light (*ha-or ha-mufla*) receives the exchange from the light that is darkened from illuminating, and it is the principle of all the colours but there is no fixed colour within it; it is like violet, and everything is equal within it, for the darkness that emanates from the light is the *alef*, as we have said, and this is the voice as it is articulated, which is called movement.' For alternative translations of these passages, see Verman, *Books of Contemplation*, 51 and 59–60, and for discussion see 156–9; Wolfson, 'Hermeneutics of Light', 109–10.

⁶⁶ Ibn Shem Tov, *Sefer ha-Emunot*, 33a.

⁶⁷ In *Gershom Scholem's Annotated Zohar*, 2490, Scholem duly noted in his marginal note that the zoharic language is based on Dan. 2: 22.

⁶⁸ *Zohar* 3: 80b.

⁶⁹ In this formulation, I am attempting to articulate the manner in which the theosophic symbolism exceeds the standard Neoplatonic emanationist scheme that begins with the absolute and indivisible One from which proceeds a second being that is itself one but also two, a one that is many. For discussion of the Neoplatonic axiom, see Hyman, 'From What is One'. From the perspective of kabbalists who adopted an essentialist view regarding the nature of the *sefirot* in relationship to Ein Sof, the oneness of God is a unity in multiplicity, but there must be an aspect of the Infinite that transcends even the attribution of unity since to be one, the one must be two.

one and the same. The point is well expressed in the sixteenth century by Joseph Ibn Şayyah:

Light is not discernible except through darkness and good emerges from the side of the portion of evil, and similarly evil emerges from the potency of the portion of good, and all the matters were mixed together. . . and in accordance with this paradigm we have found that Abraham emerged from Terah, and from Abraham emerged Ishmael through the potency of God, blessed be he, who rules over all opposites. We cannot contemplate his attributes for his ways are deeper than our ways and his thoughts are higher than our thoughts.⁷⁰

To be sure, on many occasions in *Zohar* and related kabbalistic texts the ethical ideal is presented as the containment of left in right, the restoration of the demonic to the divine, which signifies the true unity of God.⁷¹ But the point of the aforementioned passage is not simply that the sage is one who contains left in right. Ultimately, there is no distinction between left and right, for what is judged from the more limited perspective as opposites must be seen as identical in the Infinite. The wisdom of the kabbalah is reminiscent of the ancient Taoist teaching concerning the sage as transmitted by the legendary Chuang Tzu:

He too recognizes a 'this,' but a 'this' which is also 'that,' a 'that' which is also 'this.' His 'that' has both a right and a wrong in it; his 'this' too has both a right and a wrong in it. So, in fact, does he still have a 'this' and 'that'? Or does he in fact no longer have a 'this' and 'that'? A state in which 'this' and 'that' no longer find their opposites is called the hinge of the Way. When the hinge is fitted into the socket, it can respond endlessly. Its right then is a single endlessness and its wrong too is a single endlessness. So, I say, the best thing to use is clarity.⁷²

Clarity, seeing clearly, the awakening, revolves about discerning the coincidence of opposites, the hinge of the Way, wherein both right and wrong are experienced as a single endlessness. Translated into kabbalistic terms, the visionary discerns, by and through attachment to the aspect of the divine wherein limitlessness is delimited, that good is evil and evil good. Consider, by contrast, another passage from *Zohar*, which affirms the axiological framework that reinforces the duality within the divine: 'The Torah is the power of right . . . and left is contained in right. He who makes right left or left right, it is as if he destroyed the world.'⁷³ Turning left into right or right

⁷⁰ Ibn Şayyah, *She'erit Yosef*, MS Warsaw 229, fol. 170a. For a study of the thought and intellectual background of this kabbalist, see Garb, 'Kabbalah of Rabbi Joseph Ibn Şayyah'.

⁷¹ See Wolfson, 'Left Contained', and id., 'Light'.

⁷² Chuang Tzu, *Complete Works*, 40.

⁷³ *Zohar* 3: 176a.

into left is here portrayed as world-destroying, the notion of worldhood dependent on the stabilization of opposites, expressed technically as containment of left in right. To cross that boundary by making something into its opposite is an act of transgression with the potentially lethal consequences of demolishing the world. The contrast of this passage with the aforesaid comment attributed to R. Isaac is so obvious that it does not demand elaboration. Simply put, the traversing of boundaries denounced in the second passage as destructive to the world is precisely what is implied in R. Isaac's description of the divine prior to creation (or, to be more precise, emanation). Between the two passages we have contrast rather than contradiction. Still, the former passage is instructive in helping one establish what the epistemological limits are with respect to the experience of divine oneness within the ontological parameters that inform the kabbalists' life-world.

Let us consider at this juncture another zoharic passage, which is derived from *Idra Rabba* ('Great Assembly'), which together with *Idra Zuṭa* ('Small Assembly') represent the most recondite parts of zoharic literature, two narrative sections in which the master of the circle, Simeon ben Yoḥai, discloses secrets about the divine in an augmented and intensified anthropomorphic manner.⁷⁴ After having delineated the thirteen attributes of the uppermost configuration of the Godhead,⁷⁵ called by various names including *Attiqa de-Attiqin* ('ancient of ancients'), *Attiq Yomin* ('ancient of days'), *Attiqa Qaddisha* ('holy ancient one'), and *Arikh Anpin* ('long suffering' or 'long faced'), which are depicted as arrayments (*tiqqunin*) of the white beard,⁷⁶ the author sums up the matter:

It has been taught: these arrayments are called 'primordial days' (*yemei qedem*),⁷⁷ the most ancient of days. The ones that are found in *Ze'eir Anpin* are called 'everlasting days' (*yemei olam*).⁷⁸

⁷⁴ For a possible explanation of the augmented use of mythical and anthropomorphic symbols in the *Idrot* sections of zoharic literature as a corrective to the apophatic conception of God proffered in medieval Jewish philosophical texts, see Liebes, 'Myth as the Rectification', 9–10, n. 4.

⁷⁵ See Scholem, *Major Trends*, 270; Tishby, *Wisdom*, 245–6.

⁷⁶ The account of the thirteen curls of the beard is found in *Zohar* 3: 130b–134b. The description of the beard as white, extending until the centre of the heart cavity, is given towards the very beginning of the passage. The thirteen attributes by which the 'knot of faith' is bound are mentioned in 3: 62a. It is clear from that context that the reference is to *Keter*, the 'head of the king', which is crowned by these attributes. On the technical expression 'knot of faith', *qishra di-meheimanuta*, see Liebes, *Sections*, 399.

⁷⁷ This expression occurs several times in Scripture. See 2 Kgs 19: 25; Isa. 23: 7, 37: 26; Jer. 45: 26; Micah 7: 20; Ps. 44: 2; Lam. 1: 7, 2: 17.

⁷⁸ Isa. 63: 11.

It has been taught: these primordial days are all arrayed in the arrayment of the beard (*mittaḡnan be-tiqquna de-diḡna*)⁷⁹ of *Atiqa de-Atiqin*, concealed of concealed (*temira di-temirin*), thirteen comprehended within them, as it has been said, but this day (*da yoma*) is not contained in them, for it contains everything. In the time that *Attiq Yomin* will be aroused in the supernal arrayments, it is called 'one day' (*yom eḡad*), for in it his beard will be glorified, as it is written 'one day known to the Lord' (Zech. 14: 7), he alone more than anything else, the one that comprises everything, the one that is called by the name that is known.

It has been taught: in the place that there is day, there is night, for there is no day without night.⁸⁰ Since that time will be the time of the glory of the beard (*diqara de-diḡna*), and he alone is found, it will not be called 'day' or 'night', for day is mentioned only from our perspective and night is mentioned only from our perspective. Because that arrayment comprehends everything, it is not known and nothing is seen of it. From it the anointing oil flows to thirteen dimensions, to all those below illumined by this oil. The supernal, holy beard is arrayed in these thirteen arrayments, and these arrayments are arrayed in that beard, and they descend to several sides. It is not seen how they emanate or how they go out. From everything are they hidden and from everything are they concealed. There is no one who knows the place of the ancient one (*attiqā*). In their emanation, they are all contained, as we said, it is known and not known, concealed and not concealed. Concerning it is said 'I am the Lord, that is my name, I will not deliver my glory to another' (Isa. 42: 8), and it is written 'He made us and we are his' (Ps. 100: 3), and it is written 'the ancient of days is sitting' (Dan. 7: 9), he is sitting in his place, but no one knows it, he is sitting but he is not found, and it is written 'I praise you, for I am awesomely, wondrously made' (Ps. 139: 14).⁸¹

At this textual juncture, theosophic ruminations on the uppermost aspects of the divine physiognomy, depicted as the thirteen arrayments of the beard, give way to an eschatological vision, for the arrayments are identified as 'primordial days' (*yemei qedem*), the most ancient of days. The reader is told, moreover, that there are nine arrayments in the lower configuration, *Ze'eir Anpin*, referred to as 'everlasting days' (*yemei olam*). The arrayments will be aroused on the 'one day' (*yom eḡad*) that belongs exclusively to YHWH, the day that betokens the glorification of the beard. In that 'place', marked semiotically as the unity of 'one day',⁸² we cannot properly speak of a day,

⁷⁹ It is of interest to note that the Cremona edition of *Zohar*, p. 254, preserves the alternative reading *mittaḡnan be-tiqquna di-deyoḡna*, 'arrayed in the arrayment of the image'. The version translated in the body of this chapter appears in the margin of the Cremona edition as a variant.

⁸⁰ *Zohar* 1: 46a.

⁸¹ *Ibid.* 3: 134b.

⁸² In the redemptive moment, time and space converge phenomenologically, as one imaginally conceives the inconceivable. In this fullness of being that is nothing, the plenum that swells by emptying itself, distinctions fall away, including the distinction between time and space.

for there is no dichotomy between night and day. In the messianic future there will be an interval of time, which is called 'day', but there will be no division of time into nocturnal and diurnal. To underscore the point, the author of the zoharic text emphasizes that night and day are distinguished only from the human perspective. In the ultimate reality of 'one day', the schism is transcended.

The point is reiterated in a second zoharic passage whose leitmotif is the union of the fourth and the tenth of the *sefirot*, the attribute of mercy, symbolized by Abraham, and *Malkhut*, which is depicted in a number of symbolic displacements, to wit, the moon, the fourth day, the princess, identified further as the daughter given to Abraham whose name was *ba-kol*, the lower *he*, that is, the last letter of the Tetragrammaton, which is also the letter added to the name Abram, the holy city, the diminished love, and the sea. This union has messianic implications, a point linked exegetically to the prophetic utterance, 'On that day I will raise up the booth of David that has fallen' (Amos 9: 11). Interpreted kabbalistically, these words refer to the 'days of messiah' (*yomei di-meshiḥa*) when the 'holy One, blessed be he, shall lift his right hand over everything' through the agency of the 'good oil' (*mishḥa ṭava*), that is, the divine effluence that overflows from the womb of *Binah*.⁸³ As a consequence, *Malkhut* will be uplifted from her downtrodden state. The eschatological intent is alluded to in the reference 'that day', *yom ha-hu*, that is, the 'first day, the right of Abraham, which will be aroused in the future to raise her from the dust'.⁸⁴ The decoding of the prophetic vision along these theosophical lines is enhanced by the interpretation of the expression 'declares the Lord', *ne'um yhwh* (Amos 9: 12), which is linked to Abraham on account of the use of the same idiom in the words spoken to him by the angel of the Lord, 'By myself, I swear, the Lord declares', *bi nishba'ti ne'um yhwh* (Gen. 22: 16). This verse provides the key to open the door unto the deeper meaning of the theosophic myth, expressed in the image of *Ze'ir Anpin* taking an oath in the name of *Ariḥ Anpin*,⁸⁵ and its implications for understanding the texture of messianic time: 'Here there is an allusion to the name of *Attiqa*, for *Ze'ir Anpin* took an oath in his name before Abraham. Thus, that day is called neither day nor night, for it is dependent on *Attiqa* who desires to glorify his beard. On that day "I will raise up the booth of David

Hence, it is poetically troped as the 'place' and as the 'day'. I hope to explore the matter elsewhere.

⁸³ *Zohar Ḥadash*, 51c-d.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.* 51d.

⁸⁵ Similar exegesis of the verse is attested in a passage in *Zohar* 3: 66b, 130a (*Idra Rabba*). In the former context, the matter is expressed as *alef* hidden within *waw*.

that has fallen” (Amos 9: 11).⁸⁶ The messianic moment, the day in which the right side of mercy will be aroused to raise up *Malkhut*, is the time of the veneration of the beard on the part of *Attiqa*,⁸⁷ a day that cannot be divided into the conventional segments of night and day, a day, that is, which is beyond the polar coordinates of ordinary time.

Mystical enlightenment peaks with the recognition of the collusion of opposites in the undifferentiated oneness of the Godhead. The creation of the world, however, is an irruption that results in the setting of an ontic polarity that both preserves and undermines this unity. The matter is poignantly expressed in another zoharic text where the image of the nut is employed to depict the duality of good and evil, represented respectively by the inner core and the outer shell. Significantly, the dual configuration of the chain of being is presented exegetically as an explanation of the deficient spelling of the word *me'erot*, ‘lights’, in the masoretic reading of *yehi me'erot bi-reqi'a ha-shamayim lehavddil bein ha-yom u-vein ha-laylah*, ‘Let there be lights in the firmament of heaven to distinguish between day and night’ (Gen. 1: 14). The kabbalistic interpretation attested in the zoharic passage builds on an earlier midrashic tradition that relates *me'erot* to *me'erat*, the construct state of the word *me'erah*, ‘curse’. In this locution, there is an allusion to a defect in the creation of the sun and moon:

From the beginning of the secret of the supernal point until the end of all the gradations, everything is one within the other so that one thing is a shell in relation to the other . . . one thing is a garment for the other . . . this is the core and that is the shell. Even though it is a garment, it becomes the core in relation to another gradation, and everything is in this pattern, so too below to the point that man is made in this image in this world, core and shell, spirit and body, and everything is for the arrayment of the world (*tiqquna de-alma*). When the moon was conjoined as one to the sun, the moon was illumined. When it separated from the sun and it was appointed over its hosts, it diminished itself, it diminished its light, and shells upon shells were created to conceal the core. Everything was for the sake of the arrayment of

⁸⁶ *Zohar Hadash*, 51 d.

⁸⁷ In *Zohar* 3: 130b (*Idra Rabba*), the beard is described as the ‘supernal glory of the holy elder one, hidden and concealed from everything’. The beard, moreover, is characterized as the ‘praise of all praises’ and the ‘faith of all faiths’ that is hidden and invisible. The glorification of the beard may refer elliptically to phallic empowerment and exaltation. My surmise is based on the fact that, following earlier rabbinic usage, the beard in kabbalistic theosophy can refer symbolically to the phallus of the divine. For references, see Wolfson, *Circle*, 197, n. 6. If my surmise is correct, then glorifying the beard would cryptically denote the autoerotic gratification of the phallic potency in the uppermost aspect of the Godhead, a theme made more explicit in later kabbalistic sources, particularly the Lurianic kabbalah, in the depiction of the first arousal of the divine will prior to the bifurcation of the primordial anthropos into male and female, the garbing of the imageless God in the image of the androgynous male. For fuller discussion of this

the core (*tiqquna de-moħa*). Thus *yehi me'orot* (Gen. 1: 14) is [orthographically] deficient, and all this was for the arrayment of the world. Thus it is written 'to shine upon the earth' (Gen. 1: 15).⁸⁸

In the final analysis, kabbalistic literature is characterized by the seemingly clashing tasks of separating the holy from the unholy, on one hand, and restoring the unholy to the holy, on the other. As Scholem observed: 'Underlying the polarity of good and evil is not only the separation of things that are meant to be connected, but also the mingling of those realms meant to be separate. The goal of Jewish religious life, according to the Kabbalists, is to do away with this polarity and to abolish the infinite tension inherent therein.'⁸⁹ To attain genuine religious freedom one must transcend the conventional boundaries of pietistic delimitation and thereby break through the division between sacred and profane if only to reinforce the division broken through.⁹⁰ By pushing at the margin one demarcates the centre.

The radicalness of the position attributed to R. Isaac in the aforementioned passage from zoharic literature is perhaps most evident from the claim that when God wanted to reveal the depth of concealment there was no distinction between Israel and the nations. Such a viewpoint cannot possibly be applied pragmatically without disrupting the whole system of values that has informed the department of kabbalists through the generations, even those

motif, see Wolfson, 'Divine Suffering'; id., *Language, Eros, Being*, 181–4. An allusion to this mythic structure is found in *Zohar* 3: 143b (*Idra Rabba*), where mention is made of the 'principle of a human, the holy body, male and female'. The human form, which is localized in the 'holy body', comprises male and female, but it is evident from the fuller context, which discusses the union of male and female in terms of the amelioration of judgement in mercy, that the construction of gender embraced by the myth consists of the female being contained in the male.

⁸⁸ *Zohar* 1: 19b–20a.

⁸⁹ Scholem, *Mystical Shape*, 81.

⁹⁰ Here it is well to recall the Šufi notion of 'complete' unveiling (*kashf*) that arises out of but ultimately supercedes ascetic acts of self-mortification. This unveiling is predicated on an illumination that renders the normal boundaries of permissible and forbidden irrelevant. The communion with God leads, therefore, to what appears from the more limited perspective antinomian, though technically the saint is above the law and not against it. See Nicholson, *Studies*, 62–3; id., *Mystics*, 86–8; Izutsu, *God and Man*, 49–50. Consider the words of Jalāl'uddīn Rūmī in *Selected Poems From the Divāni Shamsi Tabrīz*, 31: 'The man of God is beyond infidelity and religion, | To the man of God right and wrong are alike.' See the comments of Nicholson, *ibid.* pp. xxi, xxvi, 221; Nasr, *Sufi Essays*, 146–8; Goldziher, *Introduction*, 150–5; Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, 39–50; Sells, 'Infinity of Desire'; Crone, *God's Rule*, 339–40. A similar idea is expressed by the eighteenth-century Vedic brahman Bhāskararāya, in his *Kaula Upaniṣadbhāṣya*, cited in Brooks, *Secret of the Three Cities*, 70: 'Antinomianism (*adharmā*) is the Supreme Brahman because it dispenses with qualities [of differentiation]... there is nothing other than Śakti. The sense [of all this] is that [the very notion of] difference itself is error.' See *ibid.*, 25–6. Needless to say, the depiction of the supreme being as an impersonal absolute in which all difference is overcome, the one that is beyond all duality, even the duality of being

who found their way out of the tradition, as I explored in the previous chapter. In spite of the obvious dilemma that this insight poses to the nomian framework of Jewish ritual, kabbalists could not resist articulating this feature of the experience of God. Consider, for example, the astonishing remark made a generation before the appearance of *Zohar* by the Catalan kabbalist Azriel of Gerona, in response to the hypothetical philosophical query regarding the possibility of God creating something out of nothing: ‘The One who brings forth something out of nothing is not depleted, for the something is in the nothing in the manner of the nothing, and the nothing is in the something in the manner of something. . . . The Creator is the principle of identity for every way of faith and way of heresy, for they are identical in the place of the conjunction of his nothing in his something.’⁹¹ That God should be identified as the root of faith and heresy is not shocking—indeed in a strictly monotheistic system how could it be otherwise?—but what is so provocative about Azriel’s statement is the assertion that in the Creator the way of faith and the way of heresy are equal. Clearly this presents a fundamental challenge to the normative assumptions that colour the kabbalist’s worldview. The presumed grounding of values in the structure of reality is rendered problematic by the mystical insight that in the highest stage of being there is no distinction between good and evil, faith and heresy. If good is evil and faith heresy, on what basis can one condemn or condone a particular action or belief? The strictures of moralism and nomianism would seem to dissolve for the mystic who experiences the coincidence of opposites in the Godhead. The unitive consciousness experienced by the kabbalist anticipates the eschatological state of non-differentiated unity, which is a retrieval of the paradisiacal state prior to the sin of Adam and Eve through which separation of opposites came into being.⁹²

In Chapter 1 I cited a passage from Meir Ibn Gabbai, which discerned the breakdown of polar logic in describing the state of affairs in the supreme regions of the Godhead.⁹³ In this context, I will cite another passage from the same author that likewise formulates this eradication of dichotomies in the highest aspect of the divine, but which nevertheless attempts to preserve the axiological framework that is basic to the nomian perspective of the halakhah,

and non-being, is a motif attested in much older Hindu sources including the *Bhagavad-Gita* (11: 37). For analysis, see Zaehner, *Hindu and Muslim Mysticism*, 64–85.

⁹¹ Azriel of Gerona, ‘New Fragments’, 207.

⁹² See description of Azriel’s view in Scholem, *Origins*, 454–5, and the more recent discussion in Pachter, “‘Root of Faith’”. As Pachter points out (pp. 320–1), an important source for Azriel’s locution was Judah Halevi’s *Sefer ha-Kuzari*, I. 77 wherein the ‘root of faith’ is identified as the ‘root of heresy’.

⁹³ See Ch. 1, n. 381.

which would be reflected ontologically in the emanation of the lower sefirotic emanations wherein the opposites that are joined together are separated into divergent attributes and are spatially aligned on opposing sides:

It is said that the foundation of foundations and the pillar of wisdom is to know and to comprehend that ‘the Lord is God and there is none apart from him’ (Deut. 4: 35). To understand this principle one must know that prior to the disclosure of the supernal glory, the secret of the Lord God (*yhwh elohim*), all of the entities were concealed and unified in the hidden thought, and all of the paths, the letters, the utterances, together with the souls, potencies, light and dark, good and evil, and all of the opposites were mixed there like silver and dross that are mixed together. Everything was from one source whence there came forth all of the opposites, for even though good and evil are opposite things, in the will of the soul they were mixed. When the will was clarified it was seen that the good is the essence of the will, and the evil is only for the sake of the perfection of the good, to fortify and to establish it. It follows that everything is hewn from one source, for there is no discernment in the glory regarding the entities existing in this manner [of opposites]. The hidden and simple will came to construct a palace for his glory and the mother of the children emanated with all of these entities comprised within her, and she is the secret of the supernal Egypt (*miṣrayim*), for in her all of the opposites are mingled (*miṣranim*) and mixed (*me’uravim*) together, and from there each one is fixed in the place that is appropriate for it, the light and the good in their place and the dark and the evil in their place, and the holy and pure souls separated from the impure souls. Thought emanated and was purified, and it became known that the good is its essence. The paths and the letters separated and were known in themselves, and the truth, which was concealed, hidden, and mixed with deceit, separated, and it was revealed and became manifest. This is from the master of truth, blessed be he, the great strength and the mighty hand, and through this salvation and freedom is given to all things. It is known in truth that ‘the Lord is God and there is none apart from him’.⁹⁴

Another way to express the breakdown of the dual structure of the divine relates specifically to the characterization of the first of the emanations as pure mercy. In the messianic theosophy promulgated in *Idra Rabba* and *Idra Zuṭa*, this theological idea is expressed in the bold mythical symbols of the head that is entirely white, which is symbolic of divine compassion,⁹⁵ or the beard of the Ancient of Days composed of thirteen curls, which correspond to the traditional rabbinic idea of the thirteen attributes of mercy.⁹⁶ Insofar as this

⁹⁴ *Avodat ha-Qodesh*, pt. 4, ch. 35, p. 523.

⁹⁵ *Zohar* 3: 129b, 135b, 137b.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.* 3: 131a–b. It is likely that the association of the beard and divine mercy is the symbolic underpinning of the widespread custom for kabbalists not to shave their facial hair. Regarding the prevalence of this custom in a later period, see Horowitz, ‘Early Eighteenth Century’. It must be noted that in kabbalistic sources hair can also symbolize the demonic potency of judgement. See Ch. 1, n. 357.

divine gradation is characterized as pure unmitigated mercy, there can be no evil over and against the good, no darkness over and against the light. Interestingly, the preamble to the *Idra Rabba*, which consists of the dramatic entry of the members of the fraternity into the meeting place where they will hermeneutically thrash out the secrets disclosed by Simeon ben Yoḥai, reflects in particular the struggle in the mind of the master whether or not he should reveal these esoteric matters. The ambivalence is epitomized in the utterance placed in the mouth of Simeon ben Yoḥai, 'Woe if I reveal, and woe if I do not reveal'.⁹⁷ It has been pointed out that the reluctance on the part of R. Simeon to disclose the secrets may relate in this context to the potential antinomianism of the content of what was to be revealed.⁹⁸ The point is strengthened by the citation of the verse 'It is time to act for the Lord, for they have violated your Torah' (Ps. 119: 126) in the continuation of the aforesaid passage, a verse that is interpreted as a proof-text for the possibility of anchoring the suspension of the law in the law itself already in classical rabbinic sources.⁹⁹ The interpretation of this verse in the zoharic text is as follows:

R. Simeon began [to expound] 'It is time to act for the Lord.' Why is it 'time to act for the Lord?' Because 'they have violated your Torah.' What is [the meaning of] 'they have violated your Torah?' The Torah above, which is destroyed if the rectification of this name is not performed. This is said with respect to the Ancient of Days. It is written, 'How fortunate are you, Israel, who is like you?' (Deut. 33: 29), and it is written, 'Who is like you, O Lord, among the celestials?' (Exod. 15: 11).¹⁰⁰

The urgency of the moment is marked by the need to reveal the hidden secrets. This is linked to the fact that the supernal Torah, which is identical with the sixth emanation or *Tif'eret*, is violated to the degree that its mystical essence as the Tetragrammaton and, by extension, its divine status (indicated as well by the final two verses that are cited in the passage) are not apprehended. This attribute is related, moreover, to the first of the emanations, the Ancient of Days (*Attiq Yomin*), an idea that is derived exegetically from the possessive form of the word *toratekha*, 'your Torah,' that is, the Torah (*Tif'eret*) that belongs to the Ancient of Days. The rectification of this situation is secured by the dissemination of the esoteric teaching distinctive

⁹⁷ *Zohar* 3: 127b.

⁹⁸ Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, 30. See below, n. 101.

⁹⁹ Cited below at n. 182. The talmudic discussion turns on the exegetical question of how to read the verse, i.e. does the first clause elucidate the second or the second the first? According to a passage in *Zohar* 3: 64a, the knowledge (*da'at*) imparted by Proverbs is that there are two meanings to each verse correlated with the first and second clause, and thus it is possible to read in both ways, i.e. the beginning from the end and the end from the beginning.

¹⁰⁰ *Zohar* 3: 128a.

to this section of zoharic literature, for it deals primarily with the Torah of *Attika Qaddisha* (the 'holy ancient One'), another name for *Attiq Yomin*, in contrast to the Torah of *Ze'eir Anpin* (the 'small-faced' or 'impatient One'). The former is the revelation that stems from and is descriptive of the highest configuration of the manifestation of the divine concealment, whereas the latter is the revelation that stems from and is descriptive of the lower configuration. The Torah of *Ze'eir Anpin* corresponds to what was revealed at Sinai, whereas the Torah of *Attika Qaddisha* will be fully disclosed only in the messianic age. Just as *Ze'eir Anpin* comprises within itself judgement and mercy, the left side and the right side, the Sinaitic Torah is composed of laws divided into what is permissible and what is prohibited, an axiological division that is reflective of the ontological dichotomy between the realm of holiness and that of impurity. Presumably, inasmuch as the messianic Torah is correlated with the first of the divine gradations that transcends all duality, it is beyond the distinction of sacred and profane, sanctioned and forbidden.¹⁰¹ This Torah, in contrast to what was revealed at Sinai, is constituted by pure mercy without any admixture of judgement, and thus it surpasses the dichotomies that are necessary for the nomian and moralistic perspectives. That is to say, in the non-differentiated unity appropriate to the first of the emanations, there is no basis to distinguish either between holy and impure or between right and wrong. The superiority of the messianic Torah to the Sinaitic Torah is alluded to as well in the words of R. Simeon: 'O Lord, I have heard your teaching, and I am awed' (Hab. 3: 2). There it was appropriate to be afraid, but with respect to us the matter depends on love, as

¹⁰¹ Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, 46–7, contrasts the Torah of *Ze'eir Anpin* and the Torah of *Attika Qaddisha* on the basis that the former, which combines judgement and mercy, consists of the commandments, whereas the latter, which is pure mercy, points to an 'antinomian strain' akin to the ancient gnostic attitude to the Torah. Nevertheless, Liebes is of the opinion that the zoharic text 'is not speaking here of supplanting the *Torah* with another, as is perhaps the case in *Ra'aya Meheimna* and *Tikkunei Zohar*; it speaks, rather, of deepening the *Torah* we possess and tempering it by means of a profound mystical vision'. See also id., 'Zohar and Eros', 72, n. 34. I am not certain that the more radical view is not implicit in the zoharic passage itself, although I would substitute the word 'antinomian' with 'hypernomian'. The kabbalistic perspective on the Torah to be revealed in the messianic era is obviously indebted to earlier rabbinic sources, which may preserve even older traditions that influenced the attitude toward the law expressed in nascent Christian sources. See Davies, *Torah in the Messianic Age*; id., *Setting of the Sermon*, 156–90. Finally, it must be pointed out that already attested in classical rabbinic texts is the perception that divine forgiveness, related especially to the phenomenon of repentance, is an act that defies the logical consequences required by a system of reward and punishment. I will illustrate the point by mentioning one passage from *Pesiqta Rabbati*, 44: 3, p. 987. In a dictum attributed to R. Tanḥuma bar Abba, the unique quality of repentance is illustrated by the contrast of the power of God from that of the human being on the grounds that only the former can bring forth light from darkness. Just as we would not expect a person to kindle light from darkness, so we should not expect one to revoke a judgement of guilt. But repentance, which is

it is written, “You shall love the Lord, your God” (Deut. 6: 5), and it is written, “but it was because of the love of the Lord for you” (Deut. 7: 8), and it is written, “I have loved you [said the Lord]” (Mal. 1: 2).¹⁰² In the revelation at Sinai, which is described by Ḥabakkuk,¹⁰³ fear was the appropriate image, for it comprised both judgement and mercy, but the messianic revelation, which consists solely of mercy, is dependent only on love.¹⁰⁴ The unifying force of love is such that this Torah cannot promote the polarity of holy and impure that is basic to the ritualistic framework of rabbinic Judaism,¹⁰⁵ and hence the insinuation is that the messianic Torah disclosed by Simeon ben Yoḥai is superior to the Torah revealed by Moses at Sinai.¹⁰⁶

The resemblance of the language of the zoharic text with respect to love as the binding force and the instruction of Jesus to his disciples regarding the need to love one another (John 13: 34–5) has been duly noted.¹⁰⁷ I would argue, following a similar path, that the Castilian kabbalist responsible for this homiletical prelude is reversing the standard medieval Christian portrayal of Judaism as a religion of fear, law, and discipline, in contrast to Christianity, which is based on love and compassion. The strategy employed by the zoharic author is to appropriate what has been attributed to Christianity and to present it as the esoteric truth of Judaism. Hence, the Torah to be fully disclosed in the messianic era, in contrast to the Sinaitic Torah, is based purely on love. I would suggest, moreover, that the Christological aspect is enhanced by the fact that this new Torah transcends the duality necessary to preserve the status quo of the nomian perspective articulated in traditional rabbinic literature.

linked to divine forgiveness, is predicated on the annulment of the decree that on rational grounds is completely justifiable and mandated by the Torah. From this perspective we can appreciate the manner in which the kabbalistic doctrine is a sensitive elaboration rather than a radical distortion of the rabbinic idea. On the non-judicial dimension of forgiveness and the implied suspension or interruption of the order of law, see Derrida, ‘To Forgive’, 25–6.

¹⁰² *Zohar* 3: 128a.

¹⁰³ It is also important to bear in mind that liturgically this chapter from Ḥabakkuk is chanted on the second day of Pentecost.

¹⁰⁴ On love as the bond between members of the fraternity, see *Zohar* 2: 190b.

¹⁰⁵ Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, 34–43.

¹⁰⁶ See, by contrast, the comment attributed to Simeon ben Yoḥai at the conclusion of this zoharic section that perhaps three members of the fraternity died on account of the fact that he had revealed ‘what was not revealed since the day Moses stood on Mount Sinai’ (144a). The implication of this remark seems to be that disclosure of the messianic Torah is on a par with the Sinaitic theophany. On the comparison of Moses and Simeon ben Yoḥai in zoharic literature, see Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, 15, 17, 21, 69, 73; Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*, 378–9, 390–1.

¹⁰⁷ Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, 41. For other similarities between the messianic gathering of Simeon ben Yoḥai and the mystical fraternity in this zoharic text and the narrative accounts of Jesus and his disciples, see *ibid.* 171, n. 65; 174, n. 90; 180, n. 127; and 191, n. 209.

Support for my interpretation may be elicited from another passage from this unit. The full attainment of pure mercy, which is associated theosophically with *Attiqa de-Attiqin*, the ‘Ancient of Ancients’, is deferred to the messianic future,¹⁰⁸ whereas the current historical epoch is said to be ruled by the mercy of *Ze’eir Anpin* since it comprises an element of judgement and thereby maintains the polarity of opposites.

¹⁰⁸ There are liturgical moments in the present historical epoch that anticipate the messianic time. Thus, e.g. in *Zohar* 2: 88b, the second of the three festive meals of faith on Sabbath is the banquet of *Attiqa Qaddisha*, for at that time this attribute is revealed ‘and all the worlds are joyous’. In the same passage, the time of the afternoon service on Sabbath is described as a ‘propitious moment’ (*et raṣon*) when the ‘will of wills is found and *Attiqa Qaddisha* reveals his will, and all judgements are subdued and desire and joy is found in everything’. A parallel passage is found in 3: 288b (*Idra Zuṭa*). See the description of the death of Moses at this time on Sabbath in 2: 156a, the *et raṣon* in which judgement was completely ‘contained and sweetened in mercy’. See also 3: 16a: ‘It has been taught that when all actions below are proper and the mother (*Binah*) is joyous, *Attiqa Qaddisha* is revealed and the light is restored to *Ze’eir Anpin*, and everything is joyous, everything is perfect, everything is blessed, mercy is summoned, and all the worlds are joyous, as it is written “He will return and he will love us, he will suppress our iniquities” (Micah 7: 19). What is “He will return?” *Attiqa Qaddisha* will return to be revealed in *Ze’eir*. He will return to be revealed for at first he was hidden, and everything is called repentance (*teshuvah*).’ The mystical significance of repentance is the restoration of all the lower emanations to *Binah*, the divine mother who is called *teshuvah*, which activates the uppermost attribute of the divine, *Attiqa Qaddisha*, to illumine *Ze’eir Anpin*. See Tishby, *Wisdom*, 1502. For discussion of the kabbalistic significance of *teshuvah*, especially in the zoharic corpus, see Shokek, *Repentance*, 119–37; Wolfson, ‘Fore/giveness’; Dan, *On Sanctity*, 402–34. The soteriological implication of the revelation of *Attiqa* is implied in the tradition recorded in *Zohar* 2: 52b that precisely this aspect of God was illumined at the moment that the Israelites were about to cross the reed sea on the way out of Egypt. The relationship between *Attiqa Qaddisha* and *Ze’eir Anpin*, which is the leitmotif of the third meal on Sabbath, figures prominently in the *Idrot* sections of zoharic literature, expressed especially in the image of the illumination of the forehead or face of one upon the other. See 3: 129a, 136b (in that context, *Ze’eir Anpin* is said to be illumined by *Attiq Yomin* when the holy One delights with the righteous, i.e. the homoerotic bond between God and kabbalists serves as a catalyst to trigger the union of the two masculine potencies in the divine realm, which may be best imaged as the father and the son), 288b, 293a; Liebes, ‘Poems’, 554–5; Wolfson, ‘Constructions’, 46–51; id., *Language, Eros, Being*, 367–70. The zoharic myth is embellished in the complex theosophy espoused by Luria and his disciples. Consider e.g. the description of the third meal of Sabbath in *Vital*, *Peri Eṣ Ḥayyim*, Sha’ar Shabbat, ch. 23, 89c–d: ‘Afterward, in the afternoon of Sabbath, *Ze’eir Anpin* by himself is contained in *Abba* and *Imma*, and the three of them ascend through standing in silence to the thirteenth *mazzal* of *Attiqa*, and in return they ascend to the eighth *mazzal* of the beard of *Attiqa*... In the repetition of the afternoon service, *Ze’eir Anpin* comprised in the first three [attributes] of *Abba* and *Imma* ascends to the three primordial adornments... which are *Ḥesed*, *Gevurah*, and *Raḥamim* of the beard, and *Malkhut* ascends in the lower three [attributes] of the masculine so that *Ḥesed*, *Gevurah*, and *Raḥamim* of *Ze’eir Anpin* are now in *Neṣaḥ*, *Hod*, and *Yesod* of the beard. Thus there is no ascent of *Malkhut* in the beard at all, for women do not have beards.’ An interesting use of this passage is found in Hapstein, *Avodat Yisra’el*, 262. Paraphrasing the teaching of Luria, the Maggid of Koziencie adds that this is the reason why women are not obligated to partake of the third meal on Sabbath, and he further applies this symbolic reasoning to explain why women have no obligation to sit in

It has been taught: it is written, 'The eyes of the Lord your God are upon it from the beginning of the year to the end of the year' (Deut. 11: 12). Now it is the case that 'the eyes of the Lord your God are upon it', for there is an opening of the eyes for good and for evil, since there is within him a right and a left, judgement and mercy. In the time to come, there will be found in him one eye of mercy, the eye of *Attiqa de-Attiqin*, as it is written, 'with great mercy I will gather you' (Isa. 54: 7). Inasmuch as it mentions 'mercy' (*raḥamim*), why does it say 'great' (*gedolim*)? There is, however, mercy and there is mercy, the mercy of *Attiqa de-Attiqin*, which is called the 'great mercy' (*raḥamim gedolim*), and the mercy of *Ze'eir Anpin*, which is called simply mercy (*raḥamim setam*).¹⁰⁹

The position of one eye would seem to fly in the face of a correlative logic rooted in bipolar consciousness.¹¹⁰ We might suppose that one can speak meaningfully of mercy only if there is the opposing quality of judgement, just as one can only speak of the right if there is the opposing left. However, the zoharic application of the image of one eye to the highest manifestation of the Godhead, to be realized fully in the messianic future, challenges that correlative logic, which is exhibited in the Aristotelian principles of non-contradiction and the excluded middle. In another passage from *Idra Rabba* the matter is simply expressed: 'There is no left in this concealed Ancient One

the Sukkah. For discussion of this discrepancy, see Reinhold, *Sha'ar Petaḥ ha-Gan*, 165; Semah, *Naggid u-Mesawweh*, 132–3. The reason offered for why the words *yismehu be-malkhutkha*, 'they will be joyous in your kingship', are not recited during the Sabbath afternoon service is that 'the feminine at this moment remains below and *Ze'eir Anpin* ascends to the supernal beard of *Arikkh Anpin*, and the feminine, who is called *Malkhut*, does not have joy with regard to this as she has no union since her lover ascends above'. See also the description of Pentecost in Viṭal, *Sha'ar ha-Kawwanot*, 88d: 'Therefore it is necessary now on the holiday of Pentecost to elevate *Ze'eir Anpin* above to *Arikkh Anpin*, for this is the goal of the augmentation of *Ze'eir Anpin*, for *Ze'eir Anpin* grows and takes the entire stature of *Arikkh Anpin* and becomes like him. . . . There are several levels in the matter of the augmentation of *Ze'eir Anpin* and their purpose is to elevate him to *Arikkh Anpin*, for then he ascends to the place of the beard.' On the phallic aspect of the forehead, see id., *Eṣ Hayyim* 13: 13, 68c: 'The foundation (*yesod*) of *Attiq Yomin* is hidden in the forehead of *Arikkh*.' On the (homo)erotic relationship between *Arikkh Anpin* and *Ze'eir Anpin*, consider the words of Luria commenting on the beginning of *Sifra di-Šeni'uta*, in Viṭal, *Sha'ar Ma'amerei Rashbi*, 23d: "'Before there was a balance they did not gaze upon one another's face'" (*Zohar* 2: 176b), since the feminine of *Ze'eir Anpin* emerged from behind him, their faces did not gaze upon one another; even though it emerged, it was attached to his side as one. Similarly above, before *Attiqa Qaddisha* was arrayed in the likeness of male and female, there was no balance, there was no father and mother facing one another, for the father is pure mercy and the mother pure judgement, and thus the one turned one way and the other the other way. In any case, the essence of the gazing of the faces upon one another (*iqqar hashggahat appin be-appin*) refers to *Attiqa Qaddisha* and *Ze'eir Anpin*.' The basis for Luria's comments is in zoharic literature, especially the Idrot strata. See e.g. *Zohar* 3: 128b, trans. in Wolfson, *Circle*, 196–7, n. 6.

¹⁰⁹ *Zohar* 3: 137b.

¹¹⁰ See Wolfson, 'Constructions', 60–7.

(*attiqa setima'ah*), everything is right.¹¹¹ The importance of this theme is underscored by the fact that it is repeated in a third passage from this literary unit. The use of the image of the single eye in 'The eye of the Lord is on those who fear him' (Ps. 33: 18) is contrasted with the use of plural eyes in 'Those seven eyes of the Lord ranging over the whole earth' (Zech. 4: 10): 'Come and see: in the eyes below, there is a right eye and a left eye, and they are in two colours, but here there is no left eye, and the two amount to one gradation, and everything is right. Therefore, there is one eye and not two.'¹¹² The phallic nature of the single right eye for which there is no corresponding left eye is suggested by the citation in this context of 'Joseph is a fruitful bough, a fruitful bough by a spring', *ben porat yosef ben porat alei ayin* (Gen. 49: 22). The word *ayin*, translated as 'spring', can also be rendered as 'eye', and thus the verse is linked exegetically to 'The one of good eye is blessed', *ṭov ayin hu yevorakh* (Prov. 22: 9). Bracketing for a moment the phallic implications of this eye,¹¹³ the crucial issue is the acceptance of a right in which the left is so fully contained that there is no tenable way to speak of a left side opposing the right. This point, which I consider to be an ontological principle that informed kabbalistic hermeneutics in general but that is poignantly expressed in the mythical language of the *Idrot* sections of zoharic literature, is well captured in the remark of Cordovero:

The secret of the eyes, their vision, and their providence depends on the change of qualities, that is, the colours of the eye, but in *Keter* there is no judgement so that there might be in it a court balanced (*beit din shaqul*)¹¹⁴ in its aspects, for it is entirely merciful and white. Even so there is contained within it many types of mercy... With respect to the secret of the ruling below in *Ze'eir Anpin*, there is right and left, and thus

¹¹¹ *Zohar* 3: 129a. See Viṭal, *Eṣ Ḥayyim*, 13: 13, 68c: 'Thus it is known that in *Attiqa Qaddisha* there is no left for it is entirely right as is mentioned in the *Idra* of *Naso*, and the two aspects are considered as one.'

¹¹² *Zohar* 3: 130a. This passage is cited by Recanaṭi, *Perush al ha-Torah*, 37b.

¹¹³ See e.g. *Zohar* 3: 63b, where the image of the 'good eye' (Prov. 22: 9), is associated with the priest who brings blessing to the world on account of it. From the context it is evident that the 'good eye' refers to the phallic potency, which is contrasted with the 'evil eye' (Prov. 23: 6, 28: 22) and the 'closed eye' (Num. 24: 15). For this interpretation of *shetum ha-ayin*, mentioned in conjunction with Balaam, see *Zohar* 2: 237a. On the association of the evil eye and the demonic other side, see 2: 225a, and discussion of the background of this symbol in Wolfson, 'Cut That Binds', 153, n. 153. On the eye and the phallus in kabbalistic symbolism, see id., *Through a Speculum*, 366, n. 143; id., 'Weeping', 220–8.

¹¹⁴ The rabbinic expression *beit din shaqul* connotes a court made up of an odd number so that a decision can be rendered in the event that there is a split vote amongst the other judges. See e.g. Mishnah, Sanhedrin 1: 6; Soṭah 9: 1. In an obvious divergence from its original intent, Cordovero uses this expression to convey the idea of polarity based on judgement and mercy, the left and right sides of the divine that emerge from a primordial state wherein the opposites coincide such that we can speak of one side that is entirely on the right.

there are two eyes, the right eye and left eye. But *Keter* is entirely right . . . and just as below there are two eyes with respect to the judgement in the right and in the left, above they become one on account of the unity. Thus, in every place that one eye is mentioned, it is about this aspect of *Keter*, which is the open eye . . . Therefore, there is one eye, and below there are multiple eyes, and every place that mentions 'eyes' instructs about the providence of *Ze'ir Anpin*. . . Thus, the *sefirot* below contain judgement, but above they are mercy; below they have both right and left, but above they are one, entirely right. This matter relates to the mystery that all the *sefirot* are unified in the root of the unity, and their emanation causes their differentiation. . . . Therefore, when the *sefirot* ascend to *Keter*, they do not indicate right and left and differentiation, but rather everything is right and one unity. Thus from the right comes forth the left . . . Therefore, when all the entities return to the single point in their root, all of them will be contained in mercy, for there is no left there since it has not yet emanated, and everything is right in one reality. This is the principle for all existents: in their source in *Keter*, all of them are right in one aspect.¹¹⁵

While the aforementioned zoharic passage itself does not explicitly relate to the gender implications of the imagery of the eye, they are nonetheless clear. Given the standard kabbalistic association of mercy with the masculine and judgement with the feminine, the implication of the messianic picture is that everything will be transformed into the masculine. Contrary to what we might think, however, in this state we can continue to speak of the masculine even though there is no independent feminine counterpart since the female has been restored to the male. Cordovero has expressed the theosophical notion with an allusion to an idea articulated in some rabbinic texts: above there is no left, which does not signify, as some contemporary interpreters might be tempted to suggest, that the rabbinic authors of this claim were denying the use of anthropomorphic imagery to depict the divine realm, for if that were the case then the right would also not be attributed to God.¹¹⁶ On the contrary, the intent of the rabbinic dictum is to emphasize that with respect to God there is only the right and no corresponding left.¹¹⁷ Logically, one might insist that if there is a right there must be a left, since the meaningfulness of these terms lies in their correlative nature, the one set against the other.¹¹⁸ But the force of the rabbinic notion is to get beyond such

¹¹⁵ Cordovero, *Elimah Rabbati*, 67b–c.

¹¹⁶ This obvious point is raised by Eidel, *Afiqei Yehudah*, 36b.

¹¹⁷ *Song of Songs Rabbah* 1: 13; *Exodus Rabbah* 4: 3; *Midrash Tanḥuma*, ed. Buber, Shemot, 12; *Mishpatim* 6.

¹¹⁸ This is the gist of the criticism of my position on gender in the kabbalistic symbolism offered by Elqayam, 'On the "Knowledge of Messiah"', 665, n. 107. Elqayam challenges my understanding of the containment of the female in the male on the basis of the fact that gender is a correlative phenomenon, i.e. if there is male, there is female. To be sure, according to our

correlation. Opposite attributes are not antinomical essences but complementary aspects of one reality.¹¹⁹ Hence, in the supernal world we can meaningfully posit a right with no opposing left since the left is comprised within the right. Naturally, it is possible to speak of the containment of the right in the left as well, and indeed such a formulation is utilized by kabbalists in describing a lower realm of being. In the uppermost gradation, however, it is necessary to contemplate the exclusive containment of left in right, the restoration of judgement (*hashavat ha-dinim*) to mercy.¹²⁰

This dynamic is applied by kabbalists to the construction of gender as well. In the supreme unity of the divine there is a coincidence of opposites, and thus masculine and feminine attributes must be indistinguishably unified. Simeon Lavi, the sixteenth-century kabbalist from Tripoli, expressed the matter when he noted that only the human being was created 'androgynous in one body (*du-parşufin be-guf ehad*) to instruct about the supernal Adam...for the force of overflowing (*mashpi'a*) and that of receiving (*mushpa*) were in one unity (*aḥdut ehad*) in the depths of the Nothing'.¹²¹ Lavi's language suggests a neutralizing rather than an effacement of gender difference in the undifferentiated state of nothingness wherein the potency to extend and the capacity to constrict are unified. The desire of the Infinite to procreate results in the othering of the self to produce the seemingly autonomous feminine counterpart to the masculine. In the dissolution of the primal unity, the active force of bestowing and the passive force of containing are separated. The symbolic application of the image of copulation to the divine potencies is meant to convey the idea that the rupture in God is repaired by means of restoring the other to the self, the feminine left to the masculine right, the sweetening of judgement in mercy. This is precisely the ontological condition of the highest aspect of the Godhead as is made explicit by Viṭal:

[The highest aspect of the soul] *yeḥidah* is from *Arikh Anpin*, and it is called *yeḥidah*, for from *Arikh* and below there is a female, but in *Arikh Anpin* there is no female but only male (*ein bo neqevah ki im dekhura*), and the reason is that from *Imma* and below

common-sense understanding of gender this is correct, but according to the gender paradigm articulated in some of the major works of theosophic kabbalah (based on rabbinic precedent, as I argue here) there is a move beyond gender dimorphism to a monosexual model such that we can speak of maleness without an autonomous (i.e. ontically distinct) female counterpart. For a more extended response to Elqayam's criticism, see Wolfson, 'Constructions', 60–1, n. 153; id., *Language, Eros, Being*, 177–87. Some of the sources cited in those studies are repeated here.

¹¹⁹ For the description of a similar logic, see Faivre, 'Mystische Alchemie'.

¹²⁰ See e.g. Cordovero, *Zohar im Perush Or Yaqar*, 8: 41, where the 'forehead of the will' (*hameşah ha-raşon*) is identified as the 'source of strength in *Keter*', the place to which all judgements are restored.

¹²¹ *Ketem Paz*, 1: 27c.

there are judgements, and thus there is there a female for the female is the aspect of judgements. . . . Concerning him Scripture says, 'Behold the eye of the Lord is upon those who fear him' (Ps. 33: 18). The explanation is that there are two eyes below, right and left, but he is mercy within mercy, and thus he is called 'eye', for there is but one eye. Hence, it is called *yehidah*, for no female is there but only male (*ki ein sham neqevah ki im zakhar*), [and thus it] is called singular (*yahid*).¹²²

Note the formulation that in the highest configuration of the divine there is no autonomous female but only male. Similar language is used by Viṭal elsewhere: 'The secret of the supernal will is entirely masculine and there is no discernment there of the feminine.'¹²³ The exclusively masculine nature of the highest manifestation of the divine is also expressed by the idea that the aspect of *Malkhut* is not openly revealed at this level. '*Malkhut* [of *Keter*] is not revealed . . . for in *Arikh Anpin* there is no aspect of the feminine that is openly discernible.'¹²⁴ 'There are only nine *sefirot* in *Arikh Anpin* and there is no mention of the aspect of *Malkhut*. Indeed, *Yesod* that is in him contains the secret of male and female in the image of the date-palm that comprises male and female, and this is the secret of "the righteous shall bloom like a date-palm" (Ps. 92: 13).'¹²⁵ From this perspective one can refer intelligently to maleness even in the absence of discrete femininity,¹²⁶ and hence it is perfectly acceptable to utilize the image of the single eye to depict the highest aspect of

¹²² Viṭal, *Liqqutim Hadashim*, 63.

¹²³ Id., *Eṣ Hayyim*, 39: 2, 67d.

¹²⁴ Id., *Mavo She'arim*, 28a.

¹²⁵ *Sha'ar Ma'amerei Rashbi*, 62b. See also Viṭal, *Sefer ha-Hezyonot*, 4: 43, pp. 185–6: 'There is no mention of the reality of *Malkhut* in *Atiq Yomin*, for in it there is only the existence of the nine palaces as is mentioned in the beginning of the *Idra* of *Ha'azinu*. Therefore the root of *Malkhut* that is in him is alluded to only in the secret of *Hod* that is within him, for you already know that *Malkhut* is always in *Hod*. . . . You already know that it is possible for *Malkhut*, and especially in the secret of the encompassing light (*or maqif*), to ascend higher than the male.' The passage in *Idra Zuta* to which Viṭal refers is *Zohar* 3: 288a, where it is stated that the Ancient of Ancients (*attiqā de-khol attiqin*) is arrayed when it emits nine glistening lights. Viṭal asserts that there is no independent aspect of the feminine in the supernal manifestation of the divine, yet he acknowledges that the feminine can rise above the masculine in the form of the light that encompasses.

¹²⁶ A striking formulation of positing maleness even in the absence of femaleness is found in the following eschatological description of the elevation and transformation of *Shekhinah* in Safrin, *Zohar Hai*, 11c. Commenting on the zoharic description of the mother, *Binah*, imparting her masculine garments to the daughter, *Shekhinah*, when all the Israelite males appear before her (*Zohar* 1: 2a), the Hasidic master of Komarno wrote: 'When she descends outward, then the mother imparts to the daughter her garments. At the time that all the males appear before her, they ascend until *Binah* by means of Israel, the wings of *Shekhinah*, and then the unity is attained. In the time of this unity, in the unification of the one (*be-et ha-yihud be-aḥdut eḥad*), the difference between male and female, the one that overflows and the one that receives, is not discerned, for everything is one. Then *Malkhut* is called "lord" (*adon*), masculine in the strength of the unity (*zakhar be-ošem ha-yihud*).' The unity achieved when all things are restored to

the Godhead; we do not need to posit a second eye to speak meaningfully of the single eye. The aspect of the soul correlated with this element of the divine is called *yeḥidah*, which connotes singularity, for there is no other in relation to it since it comprises everything in the unity of itself. As the matter is expressed in another passage by Viṭal: ‘The great encompassing [light], which is *yeḥidah* and which is in the aspect of *Arikh Anpin* . . . encompasses everything equally, and to all of them it imparts the light of the aspect of the soul (*neshamah*). Therefore, it is called *yeḥidah*, for it has only one aspect in one equanimity.’¹²⁷ This idea is reiterated in slightly more detailed language in a description of the light of Ein Sof given by Viṭal in a discourse on the world of emanation:

Know that with respect to this light above *Keter*, even though there is some judgement, it is nonetheless so ameliorated that it is not considered as judgement at all. When it enters *Keter*, which is already a vessel, it is considered as judgement. All is one configuration (*parṣuf*) insofar as the vessel is pure and refined. Therefore, there is in it no feminine as there is below in the case of *Abba* and *Imma*, *Ze’eir* and *Nuqba*. Rather all is contained in one configuration (*ha-kol kalul be-farṣuf eḥad*) concerning which it says ‘the eye of God’ (Ps. 33: 18). There are not two eyes, that is, *Hesed* and *Din*, for all is one.¹²⁸

It is possible, indeed mandatory, to think of the highest configuration of God as the single eye, which is completely masculine in nature,¹²⁹ the eye of pure

Binah is marked by the overcoming of gender dimorphism. There is, in the precise language of the text, no way to discern the difference between male and female. Nevertheless, in this state, the feminine potency, *Malkhut*, is depicted as masculine; indeed, it is in virtue of the unity that the female is transformed into a male.

¹²⁷ *Eṣ Hayyim*, 6: 5, 28a.

¹²⁸ *Liqquṭim Ḥadashim*, 22–3.

¹²⁹ On the depiction of the highest aspect of the Godhead as a male in which the female is contained, consider the following comment in the compilation of Nathan of Gaza, *Liqquṭei Raza de-Malka Meshiḥa*, MS New York, Jewish Theological Seminary of America Mic. 1549, fol. 1b: ‘Furthermore, we must ask, it is known to us that no configuration (*parṣuf*) comes to be except from male and female, so how can it be said that *Attiqa Qaddisha* has no female and that Ein Sof as well has no female? We must respond that in truth there is no female there in actuality, but there is a female in potentiality. . . and with respect to Ein Sof as well there is no [female] in actuality but the aspect of the female is connected there to the point that we do not mention her for everything is one.’ On the masculine nature of Ein Sof, consider as well the following remark in the Sabbatian commentary on Psalms of Israel Ḥazzan, MS Kaufmann, Budapest 255, fols. 7a–b: ‘Know that with respect to all the supernal, holy attributes, when an attribute receives the overflow from what is above it, then this attribute is referred to as feminine, but when that very attribute overflows to what is beneath it, then that attribute is referred to as masculine, for the male overflows and the female receives the overflow. This is the case with all the attributes that emanate excluding the supernal emanator who is the light of the straight line (*or qaw ha-yashar*), for his light overflows to all the worlds that emanate from him, and his light is called the light of the Infinite (*or ein sof*).’

mercy in which the attribute of judgement is entirely ameliorated.¹³⁰ The point is well expressed by the seventeenth-century Ashkenazi kabbalist Naftali Bachrach, who notes that the anthropomorphic application of the eye to God signifies divine providence. A difference exists, however, between the character of providential care assigned respectively to higher and lower configurations of the Godhead, which is reflected in the textual shift from the use of two eyes to describe God (Deut. 11: 12) to the use of one eye (Ps. 33: 18). In the lower divine countenance, *Ze'ir Anpin*, the ten essences (*hawwayot*) are divided into two groups of five, which correspond to the left eye of strength and the right eye of grace. By contrast, in the upper countenance, *Arikh Anpin*, there is only one eye, which comprises all ten potencies since the forces of strength are sweetened in and bound to the forces of mercy. Regarding this state, one can apply the scriptural reference, 'The one of a good eye¹³¹ is blessed' (Prov. 22:9).¹³² The logic of the kabbalistic symbolism thus affords us the possibility to speak in a meaningful way about the right without a corresponding left, a male that has no distinct female counterpart.¹³³ In the most primordial aspect of the divine, which some kabbalists believed would have full reign of power in the messianic era when all things were to return to the Godhead, the logic of correlation gives way to a textual reasoning that defies the necessity to posit a female that is ontologically distinct from the male. The eschatological suspension of gender dimorphism bespeaks as well the overturning of the axiological framework, but it is precisely such an overturning that makes possible the convergence of the ethical and the mystical in the theosophic symbolism of kabbalists.

A particularly interesting description of this phenomenon is given by Gikatilla, who thus described the first of the ten emanations of the divine, *Keter*, identified further as the divine will (*raṣon*) or that which is nothing (*ayin*): 'This is the world of complete grace and mercy, for he atones for every

¹³⁰ The kabbalistic symbol of the supernal eye of pure compassion is utilized in Kook, *Orot ha-Qodesh*, 3: 326–7, to legitimate the pietistic demand to eradicate anger from one's heart and to look upon the world with unmitigated mercy.

¹³¹ I have rendered the expression *ṭov ayin* quite literally, but its idiomatic meaning is the one who is generous.

¹³² Bachrach, *Emeq ha-Melekh*, 15b.

¹³³ The phallic implications of the supernal eye, which has no corresponding eye, are alluded to in another passage in *Emeq ha-Melekh*, 35a. In that context, the verse 'The one of a good eye is blessed' (Prov. 22: 9) is applied to Joseph, who represents the 'secret of *Yesod*, the holy covenant' (*berit qodesh*), for 'he shines from the eye of *Arikh*, the open eye, for there is naught but one eye there, and this is the secret of the five good essences that numerically equal [the word] *ayin*. This is the secret of "Truly the eye of the Lord is on those who fear him, who await for his grace" (Ps. 33: 18).' Bachrach is here drawing on a much older motif in kabbalistic literature based on the phallic character of the uppermost gradation. On the phallic intent of the symbol of the eye, see above, n. 113.

sin and for every iniquity, even though of this no human beings are worthy.¹³⁴ The first emanation, which for Gikatilla is identical with Ein Sof, is portrayed as the quality of grace that is not commensurate to what human beings justly deserve. On the contrary, this property of divine love is predicated on the unworthiness of the recipient, for if the recipient were worthy, the love that would be appropriate would be the lower manifestation in which there is an admixture of judgement, the sixth emanation, compassion (*raḥamim*) that is connected with justice (*mishpat*).¹³⁵ The love that is linked to *Keter*, by contrast, is beyond justice; it is the world of pure mercy, to which Gikatilla (in line with the zoharic symbolism of the *Idrot* sections) refers by the startling symbol of the white head (*ro'sh lavan*).¹³⁶ For Gikatilla, the ontological dualism and gender polarity that characterizes the sefirotic emanations, right and left, front and back, masculine and feminine, the power to overflow and the desire to receive, begin from *Ḥokhmah*, the second *sefirah* that is considered to be the first emanation since *Keter* is eternal:¹³⁷

We have already explained that from *Keter* and below there is no simple attribute (*middah peshutah*) that is not mixed with its counterpart, for the emanation of *Ḥokhmah*, which derives from *Keter*, necessitates all opposites, all of the mixtures, and all of the way of emanation and the bond of the chariots. For *Ḥokhmah* is adjacent to *Keter* and *Binah*, and since it is placed between these two emanations it has a front and back, the front turned toward *Keter* and the back toward *Binah*. And since it has a front and back, it is the cause of all opposites, differences, and mixtures in the world, and from here is generated every front and back, white and black, right and left, above and below. This is one of the deep secrets in the bonds of the chariot and the emanations of the essences. The one who comprehends this secret will understand all of the chariots and all of the levels of emanation, for they are in the form of that which receives and that which overflows, and this is the secret of the androgyne.¹³⁸

¹³⁴ Gikatilla, 'Final Section', 138. See also *Sha'arei Orah*, 1: 190.

¹³⁵ *Sha'arei Orah*, 2: 108–10, 197–8.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.* 2: 125–6.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.* 1: 233. For discussion of the position adopted by Gikatilla in his theosophic works in light of the philosophical orientation of his earlier works, see Farber-Ginat, "Shell Precedes the Fruit", 121–4.

¹³⁸ *Sha'arei Orah*, 1: 237. Cf. the formulation in Gikatilla's *Le Secret du mariage*, 42–3 (I have translated the Hebrew text from Mopsik's edition into English): 'Know that the one who knows the secret of the supernal gradations and the emanation of the *sefirot* in the secret of that which overflows and that which receives, in the secret of earth and heaven and of heaven and earth, knows the secret of the bond of all the *sefirot* and the secret of all the created beings in the world, how they receive from one another. All of them receive the power of emanation, sustenance, subsistence, and vitality from the Lord, blessed be he. The one who knows this way knows the power in man through the performance of the 613 commandments and the rectification of the channels in all that overflows and receives.'

Ostensibly, it would appear that the simplicity of *Keter*, which stands in contrast to the composite nature of *Hokhmah* and all subsequent emanations in the sefirotic pleroma, places it above all forms of polarity. Accordingly, it would not be appropriate to depict *Keter* by any gender; the infinite and simple will is neither male nor female. However, a more attentive reading of Gikatilla's theosophic symbolism suggests that even this will is characterized in terms that are gendered as masculine. Thus, the supernal gradation, as Gikatilla puts it in another passage, is designated as the 'attribute of complete mercy (*raḥamim gemurim*), and it is called *Ehyeh*, the elder (*zaqen*), and it pities without any admixture of judgement.'¹³⁹ The theosophic intent of the title *zaqen*, the elder, is related to the function of *Keter* as the quality that ameliorates all lower expressions of judgement. Divine judgement rises to the attribute of pure mercy, which is first, and thus the oldest, but also the last, which is the youngest. The one that was (conveyed by *zaqen*) is the one that shall be (implied in the name *ehyeh*).¹⁴⁰ Brilliantly, Gikatilla links this process exegetically to the biblical account of Isaac's eyesight dimming when he turned old, *wayehi ki zaqen yiṣḥaq wa-tikhkena enaw mere'ot* (Gen. 27: 1): The dimming of the eyes of Isaac symbolically conveys the diminution of the attribute of judgement when it rises to and merges with the complete and pure mercy.¹⁴¹ A cryptic allusion is made here as well to an anthropomorphic motif developed more fully in the *Idrot* sections of zoharic literature: the infinite power of God, the world of unalloyed mercy, is expressed in the thirteen attributes of mercy, the thirteen supernal springs of divine overflow, which can also be portrayed as the thirteen curls of the beard of the holy ancient One. The verbal hint to this arcane myth lies in the fact that the word *zaqen* can also be vocalized as *zaqan*, the 'beard'. A fuller disclosure is offered in another passage where the specific focus is on the word *zaqan*:

¹³⁹ *Sha'arei Orah*, 1: 231. See *ibid.* 2: 107.

¹⁴⁰ The paradoxical confluence of the ancient and the novel—only that which has been eternally can come again in the incessant flow of time—is typical of mystical consciousness. The point was well expressed by Nietzsche, *Philosophy in the Tragic Age*, 50. In response to the question how Anaximander would account for the fact that there is still a process of coming-to-be even though an eternity of time has passed, Nietzsche wrote: 'And from this question he can save himself only by a mystic possibility: eternal coming-to-be can have its origin only in eternal being; the conditions for the fall from being to coming-to-be in injustice are forever the same; the constellation of things is such that no end can be envisaged for the emergence of individual creatures from the womb of the "indefinite".' Here one can discern the seeds for Nietzsche's own doctrine of the eternal return of the same, articulated in his later works. See Stambaugh, *Nietzsche's Thought*; Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, vol. 2; Klossowski, 'Nietzsche's Experience', and a different translation of the same essay in *id.*, *Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle*, 55–73; Löwith, *Nietzsche's Philosophy*; Lukacher, *Time-Fetishes*, 115–38.

¹⁴¹ For an altogether different reading of this verse that relates the blindness of Isaac to the augmentation of the power of judgement and the weakening of mercy, see *Zohar* 3: 197a.

We must also alert you to the great secret, and this is the secret of the supernal embellishments (*ha-tiqqunim ha-elyonim*) that are called the 'beard' (*zaqan*), and they are the secret of *Tif'eret*. This matter is a great secret from the secrets of the chariot (*sodot ha-merkavah*)... The one who knows the secret of the hairs of the beard (*se'arot ha-zaqan*) knows the secret of *Tif'eret*, and from this secret are born all the parts of the chariot (*pirqei ha-merkavah*), for they spread forth from *Tif'eret* to here and to there. This secret is hidden and sealed in what is said by Scripture, 'It is the splendour of a man (*tif'eret adam*) to dwell in a house' (Isa. 44: 13). And this is the secret of what Solomon said, 'His splendor (*tif'arto*) passes over the transgression' (Prov. 19: 11). And this is the secret regarding the fact that the blessed and exalted One forever is glorified in his creatures after they sin since they return in repentance, and this is sufficient to the one who comprehends.¹⁴²

In a commentary on the ten *sefirot* preserved anonymously, but which was apparently composed by Gikatilla,¹⁴³ the matter is expressed in the following manner:

The secret of *Keter* is the secret of the primordial existence... and it is called Ein Sof, and it has no boundary, no beginning, middle or end... and this is called the world of mercy... and this is the source whence emerge the thirteen attributes of mercy, and in this place there is no change at all, but it is entirely pure mercy, and it exists perpetually in oneness... Thus from this *sefirah* come forth thirteen springs of mercy, and there is no judgement at all, but rather they are entirely pure mercy.¹⁴⁴

In the infinite will of God, therefore, every act of judgement is transformed into mercy since in that gradation the divine unity is expressed as pure mercy without any admixture of judgement. But if that is the case, then we must presume a suspension of the ethical, for the standard by means of which we distinguish between the one who acts morally and the other who does not is problematized by the fact that in this world of complete mercy there is no room for any opposite. The exceptionality of this aspect of the theosophic symbolism is underscored by Gikatilla's remark that the attribution of the

¹⁴² *Sha'arei Orah*, 1: 252–3. The theosophic notion of thirteen attributes of mercy comprised within *Keter* is affirmed by other kabbalists with links to the circle responsible for the production of zoharic literature. See e.g. Joseph of Hamadan, '*Sefer Tashak*', 81, 96. On the especially recondite quality associated with the beard of the highest manifestation of the divine, see *ibid.* 109, which parallels *Zohar* 3: 127b (*Idra Rabba*). See *ibid.* 111–13.

¹⁴³ On the identification of this text, see Ch. 1, n. 359.

¹⁴⁴ MS Vatican ebr. 456, fol. 16a. The influence of Gikatilla is also discernible in the description of the first emanation in the anonymous *Sefer ha-Shem*, 6b, as 'pure mercy without any admixture of judgement at all, to have compassion on everyone... the holy ancient One (*Attiqa Qaddisha*) in the language of the *Zohar* of the Rashbi, according to the view that *Keter* is Ein Sof, and *attiqa* means primordial (*qadmon*), the elder (*zaqan*), for he is primordial to everything that is primordial, and thus he is filled with mercy.'

third-person masculine pronoun *hu* to *Keter* ‘alludes to the nexus (*qesher*) of the emanation of the world of mercy (*sefirat olam ha-raḥamim*) with the rest of the emanations. And this is a very deep matter that a man must transmit through an oral tradition (*qabbalah peh el peh*), to know the way one must go to contemplate how the emanation of mercy is revealed to the other emanations, and how he transforms the attribute of judgement to the attribute of mercy.’¹⁴⁵ The paradoxical metamorphosis of judgement into mercy, the collapse of one opposite into its other, which is predicated on the identity of indifference, is a profound mystery that can only be disclosed through an oral transmission of the esoteric tradition from master to disciple.

An allusion to this suspension of the nomian is found in the description of *Keter* as the ‘supernal fortune (*mazzal ha-elyon*) in the secret of the thirteen attributes of mercy that are fixed in *Keter*, for children, livelihood, and sustenance are dependent on that very fortune,¹⁴⁶ and even the Torah scroll is dependent on it, and this is what the rabbis, blessed be their memory said,¹⁴⁷ “Everything depends on fortune, even the Torah scroll in the ark”.¹⁴⁸ Gikatilla is quick to warn the reader not to think that this dictum implies that Torah is dependent on the astral constellations (*mazzalot*), for God created the world in its entirety by means of Torah and it would make no sense to speak of Torah being dependent on a heavenly body.¹⁴⁹ What, then, does it mean to say that everything is dependent on *mazzal* including the Torah scroll? The esoteric import of the pronouncement is that the word *mazzal* refers to the ‘supernal fortune that is known in *Keter*, for all the *sefirot* and all

¹⁴⁵ *Sha’arei Orah*, 2: 117.

¹⁴⁶ Babylonian Talmud, Mo’ed Qaṭan 28a.

¹⁴⁷ As Ben-Shlomo remarks in his edition of *Sha’arei Orah*, 1: 162, n. 27, the citation that Gikatilla attributes to the rabbis is not known from any extant rabbinic source. Ben-Shlomo also observed that the precise expression in Hebrew is found in *Zohar* 3: 134a (*Idra Rabba*), where it is transmitted in the name of R. Eleazar, the son of R. Simeon ben Yoḥai. The appearance of the same citation in the zoharic text and Gikatilla was already noted by Scholem, ‘Did Moses de León Compose the *Zohar*’, 27. In *Book of the Pomegranate*, 194, Moses de León similarly refers to the ‘great fate (*ha-mazzal ha-gadol*) upon which the Torah scroll is dependent.’ As I noted in the introduction to *Book of the Pomegranate*, 51–2, the symbolic interpretation of this dictum in Gikatilla parallels the zoharic usage, which differs from that of de León. For further comparison of Gikatilla, de León, and *Zohar* on this topic, see Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, 99–100.

¹⁴⁸ *Sha’arei Orah*, 1: 162. See *ibid.* 78, and the description of *et raṣon*, the ‘propitious time’, in Moses of Kiev, *Shoshan Sodot*, 13a (in part corrected by MS Oxford, Bodleian Library 1656, fol. 54b): ‘There are thirteen attributes of mercy in the name *Ehyeh*, which bears the supernal Crown (*keter elyon*), and when one of them is opened it is the propitious time, and how much more so when all of them are opened. On them all that is desired is dependent, as the rabbis, blessed be their memory, said, “Livelihood, children, and sustenance are not dependent on merit but on fortune”, that is, the supernal fortune (*mazzal elyon*), which is *Keter*, and these three comprise the needs of a human being.’

¹⁴⁹ See *Sha’arei Orah*, 2: 22–3.

created entities are dependent on it, and even Torah is dependent on it. It is called *mazzal* because from it issue forth (*nozlim*) the powers in all the *sefirot* and in all human beings, and the Torah scroll also draws power from this fortune and it receives from it.¹⁵⁰

Gikatilla has provided the symbolic interpretation of the saying, which precludes an astrological reduction of Torah to the fate of the heavens. One is hardly surprised, for such an understanding would smack of idolatry in the classical rabbinic understanding. But what does the statement that even the Torah scroll is dependent on *mazzal* really mean? The *mazzal* refers to the aspect of *Keter* whence all beings in the divine and mundane realms emanate, the single eye that is pure mercy, a world that is entirely masculine. It is the pre-eminent ontological source, the spring of effluence that gushes forth in unabated beneficence to sustain the existence of all levels of being. Thus, to say that the Torah itself is dependent on *mazzal* is to suggest that this attribute of God transcends the duality that characterizes the attribute to which Torah corresponds, that is, the gradation of *Tif'eret*, which is a balance between judgement and mercy, left and right. The supernal fortune is pure compassion, the quality of love that has the capacity to erase the stain of guilt completely since it exceeds the dichotomy of right and wrong. One is here reminded of Nietzsche's remark, which deeply echoes the Pauline perspective on grace and deeds: 'Whatever is done from love occurs beyond good and evil.'¹⁵¹ From the vantage-point of the theosophic symbolism embraced by Gikatilla, the act of divine love exceeds the dualism of good and evil, which is expressed architecturally as the division of the divine form into right and left. The true significance of the assertion that even the Torah scroll is dependent on *mazzal* is that the law itself derives from the aspect of God that surmounts the nomian framework of permissible and forbidden. Gikatilla's position is in line with the view expressed in the *Idrot*, as discussed above, concerning the distinction between the present Torah made up of the duality of good and evil, on the one hand, and the messianic Torah that is pure love, on the other. As in these sections of zoharic literature, Gikatilla maintains that Torah derives from a higher source that is connected with the uppermost manifestation of the divine. Interestingly, the statement that 'everything depends on fortune, even the Torah scroll in the ark' appears in Hebrew in the *Idra Rabba* with an intent that is identical to Gikatilla.¹⁵²

¹⁵⁰ Ibid. 1: 163. For a later attestation of this idea, see Joseph Ibn Šayyah, *She'erit Yosef*, MS Warsaw 229, fol. 4a. On the characterization of *Keter* as pure mercy with no admixture of judgement, see *ibid.*, fol. 40b.

¹⁵¹ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, § 153, p. 90.

¹⁵² See above, n. 147.

In some measure, the kabbalistic orientation is anticipated in the rabbinic attribution to God of the concept of *lifnim mi-shurat ha-din*, which conveys the act of going beyond the strict letter of the law.¹⁵³ In one talmudic context, the possibility of God acting in this manner, which entails as well the suspension of the ethical standard decreed by the law, is presented as the very substance of divine prayer.¹⁵⁴ In a second context, a contrast is drawn between Torah, in which truth is written, and judgement (*din*) in which no truth is written; only with respect to the latter is it said that God acts beyond the measure of the law.¹⁵⁵ As in many issues, so in this particular case, a kabbalistic author expands and elaborates the fragmented aggadic tradition of the rabbis. The implicit idea that God's mercy may surpass the demands of the law is ontologized by the kabbalistic depiction of the first of the hypostatic emanations that transcends the binary polarity expressed as the separation into right and left. This place is reached not by dutiful compliance to law but through prayer that wells spontaneously from the depth of human suffering, as we find in the description of Ḥannah, 'In her wretchedness, she prayed over the Lord, weeping all the while' (1 Sam. 1: 10). Ever an exacting exegete, Gikatilla notes that the verse does not say that she prayed 'to the Lord', *el yhw*, but 'over the Lord', *al yhw*. Gikatilla adduces a deep theosophic secret from this seemingly trivial grammatical point: Ḥannah's prayer rose to the place above the Tetragrammaton, that is, to the name *Ehyeh*, the gradation of *Keter* that is atop *Tif'eret*, 'the place of the fortune that is known that bestows from the side of grace and compassion to the one that finds favour in his eyes in the secret of the thirteen attributes of mercy in the *sefirah* of *Ehyeh*, which is the secret of *Keter*'.¹⁵⁶ The axiological application of this ontological point is reflected in the imitation of divine love on the part of the Jew that transcends the conventional distinction between guilt and innocence.

A similar point, albeit in slightly different symbolic language, is made by the anonymous author of *Sefer ha-Peli'ah*:

Understand that had the Torah been given from the supernal Wisdom, which is true mercy, there would have been no difference between one who studies and one who does not study, for true mercy will not be punitive. Therefore, it was given from

¹⁵³ On the talmudic notion of *lifnim mi-shurat ha-din* applied to human behaviour, see Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 45*b*, Ketuvot 97*a*, Bava Qama 99*b*–100*a*, Bava Meš'i'a 24*b*, 30*b*; *Mekhilta*, Yitro, ch. 2. For discussion of this rabbinic concept, see Lichtenstein, 'Does Jewish Tradition Recognize'.

¹⁵⁴ Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 7*a*.

¹⁵⁵ Babylonian Talmud, Avodah Zarah 7*b*.

¹⁵⁶ *Sha'arei Orah*, 1: 163.

Tif'eret, for it comprises judgement and mercy so that there would be reward and punishment for the one who studies and the one who does not study. This is the intent of the rabbis, blessed be their memory, when they said the Torah was given as black fire upon white fire,¹⁵⁷ for the strength is black and the greatness is white and *Tif'eret* is made up of both of them. Thus the Torah was given from it, and the Written Torah is written with black ink on white parchment, and everything else is invalid.¹⁵⁸

The point was perfectly understood as well by the Moroccan kabbalist Ya'aqov Ifaragan,¹⁵⁹ who remarked in his commentary on *Pirquei Avot*, the rabbinic 'Chapters of the Fathers', that *Keter* is called by the sages of the tradition the 'attribute of equanimity (*middat ha-hashwa'ah*) for the righteous and the wicked are identical in relation to it'.¹⁶⁰ The lower form of divine compassion, wherein mercy is mixed together with judgement, is a more suitable model for human behaviour in the social sphere, for only such love can render a just verdict insofar as it is a balance between mercy and judgement, compassion and discipline. In the highest aspect of the divine will, however, there is no judgement at all, and consequently, this quality must lie beyond the domain of the ethical. Indeed, as Elijah de Vidas expressed the matter, in the highest manifestation of the divine concealment, referred to on the basis of the zoharic terminology as *attiqā* (the 'ancient one'), nature, designated by the name *elohim*, which denotes the attribute of judgement, is transformed, for everything is converted into mercy.¹⁶¹ The insight expressed here is based in part on the presumed numerological equivalence of the words *ha-ṭeva*, 'nature', and *elohim*, that is, both words equal 86.¹⁶² The numerical equivalence conveys the philosophical idea that nature is dependent on boundary and delimitation, which are associated with the attribute of judgement. When the latter is contained entirely in mercy, nature is transcended, for there is no order or structure. The trespassing of the natural order constitutes the nature of the miracle, but in this miraculous state the grounds for moral action seem to be undermined by the coincidence of antinomies in the Godhead. Even the wretched one is forgiven his wretchedness in the forgiveness that effaces the difference between right and wrong, irreproachable and liable.

¹⁵⁷ For references to this aggadic motif, see Scholem, *On the Kabbalah*, 38, n. 2.

¹⁵⁸ *Sefer ha-Peli'ah*, 28b–c.

¹⁵⁹ Regarding this kabbalist, see Ḥallamish, 'R. Ya'aqov Ifaragan'.

¹⁶⁰ Zafrani, *Éthique et mystique*, 167.

¹⁶¹ *Re'shit Hōkhmah*, Sha'ar ha-Ahavah, ch. 8, 1: 534.

¹⁶² For discussion of the history of this numerology, see Idel, *Ma'imōnide et la mystique juive*,

DEMARCATING THE LAW BY EXTENDING ITS LIMIT

One may contend that the dissolution of dualistic structures implied in the monopsycheic consciousness of mystical experience demands the overcoming of a more limited perspective based on moral distinctions between right and wrong. Presumably, the kabbalist's encounter of the divine beyond duality would challenge the strictures of the nomian framework. While I readily acknowledge the element of mystical sensibility that ventures past the limits of lawfulness, I would argue nonetheless that the path beyond the path of law need not necessarily entail the breaking of law; it may guide one rather to the path that is genuinely no-path, that is, the path beyond the path of law that provides the very conditions for there to be any law at all, a state of lawfulness without any law.¹⁶³ Before clarifying my position by delving into a detailed textual analysis, let me contrast it with the view expressed by Scholem on the matter of the antinomian character of mysticism.

In his published work, Scholem repeatedly emphasized that mystical experience presents the possibility of undermining the norms of the given society within which that experience took shape. Scholem's view is based on his assumption regarding the inherently amorphous, and hence potentially anarchic, nature of mystical experience.¹⁶⁴ In the history of Judaism, according to Scholem, mystics have been successful to the extent that they have tempered the radically novel and innately antinomian quality of their experiences by the standard norms of tradition. This yields the paradox regarding the concomitantly innovative and conservative character of mysticism, a cornerstone of Scholem's phenomenological understanding of mystical experience. In an essay on the historical development of Jewish mysticism that appeared in 1944, Scholem demarcated the two main features of the 'religious streams' that have converged historically to give shape to the phenomenon of kabbalah in the following way: on the one hand, the goal of these streams was to 'arrive at a religious consciousness beyond intellectual

¹⁶³ I have borrowed this formulation from Bernstein, *Fate of Art*, 102: 'Lawfulness without law provides, more concretely than the concept of judgement, a way of characterizing works of genius as the establishing of indeterminate schemata. Lawfulness now refers to the "appearance of nature" thesis, while without law refers to transcendental opacity, the withdrawal of origin.'

¹⁶⁴ Scholem, *On the Kabbalah*, 8–11. For a more recent discussion of the presumption that mystical experience is fundamentally amorphous and thus historically conditioned, see Hollenback, *Mysticism*, 75–93. A summary account of the main thesis of the book is given on p. 130: 'Mystical experience is that amorphous, well-ordered, historically conditioned, trans-sensory metamorphosis of the waking consciousness that usually supervenes only after the individual has achieved recollectedness.'

apprehension', which is 'attained by man's delving into himself by means of contemplation, and the inner illumination which results from this contemplation'. On the other hand, these streams have always 'tried to maintain their position within the existing Jewish framework of their time and to refrain from controversy with it, insofar as this was possible'.¹⁶⁵ Scholem thus considered potential conflict with the halakhic norm as germane to the mystical phenomenon. For Scholem the Jewish mystic's encounter with the divine bears in its bosom the germ of antinomianism, for he experiences the 'nothingness of revelation' (*Nichts der Offenbarung*),¹⁶⁶ the absolute concreteness of the word of God that can never be expressed in any particular form, the ineffable presence that occasions through its concealed immediacy an 'anarchic suspension'.¹⁶⁷

A succinct formulation of Scholem's view is given in the sixth of ten aphorisms entitled 'Zehn unhistorische Sätze über Kabbala', which he published in 1958:

Just as nature, Kabbalistically seen, is nothing but a shadow of the divine name, so one can also speak of a shadow of the law, which is cast ever longer over the Jews' way of life. But in the Kabbalah, the stony wall of the law gradually becomes transparent; a shimmer of the reality surrounded and circumscribed by it breaks through. This alchemy of the law, its transmutation into the transparent, is one of the deepest paradoxes of the Kabbalah, for what in principle could be less transparent than this shimmer, this symbolic aura that now appears? But along with this ever increasing, if also ever more indistinct transparency of the law, the shadows which the law casts over Jewish life dissolve. The end of this process must, logically speaking, be Jewish 'Reform': the shadowless, backgroundless, but no longer irrational, purely abstract humanity of the law as a remnant of its mystical dissolution.¹⁶⁸

Essential in Scholem's thinking is the recognition of a dialectical process inherent in kabbalistic sources that extends the law beyond the bounds of its own limit.¹⁶⁹ Whether or not we are prepared to accept Scholem's explan-

¹⁶⁵ Scholem, *On the Possibility*, 121.

¹⁶⁶ The expression was used by Scholem in a letter to Walter Benjamin dated 20 Sept. 1934, in an effort to define the relationship to the law depicted in Kafka's *Trial*. See *Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem*, 142. For discussion of this aspect of Scholem's religious nihilism, see Mosès, 'Patterns of Negativity', 222–3; Handelman, *Fragments*, 49–51, 54, 89–91, 165.

¹⁶⁷ The expression is derived from Scholem, *Walter Benjamin*, 72, cited and discussed by Handelman, *Fragments*, 56.

¹⁶⁸ The original German and partial English translation are found in Biale, 'Gershom Scholem's Ten Unhistorical Aphorisms', 113–14. My rendering of the passage includes a part of the text not translated by Biale. For an analysis of Scholem's aphorisms, see also Dan, 'Beyond the Kabbalistic Symbol'; and Schäfer, 'Die Philologie der Kabbala', 19–21.

¹⁶⁹ Scholem, *Messianic Idea*, 19–24, 49–141; id., 'Der Nihilismus', 27–35. See also Scholem's formulation in *Walter Benjamin*, 136: 'Benjamin was the first person I told about a very

ation of the inner dynamic of Jewish history leading from the pseudo-messianic movements of Sabbatianism and Frankism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to the rise of the rationalist enlightenment (*haskalah*) and Reform Judaism in the nineteenth century, there seems to me little reason to question the soundness of his understanding of a dialectical impulse in the kabbalistic sources that tests the centre of the tradition at its margins. As he puts the matter elsewhere, the kabbalistic systems were ‘conceived as conservative ideologies within the frame of Rabbinical Judaism’, yet these very systems were so ‘revolutionary in implication that their conservative character was time and again called into question’. In the phenomenon of the kabbalah, therefore, one finds a ‘mystical trend which changes the face of historical tradition while striving to preserve it unchanged, which extends the limits of religious experience while trying to consolidate them . . . on the one hand it strives forward, while on the other, in delving for new layers of religious experience, it unearths age-old, archaic elements’.¹⁷⁰ In another context, Scholem expresses the matter as follows:

Reverence for the traditional has always been deeply rooted in Judaism, and even the mystics, who in fact broke away from tradition, retained a reverent attitude towards it; it led them directly to their conception of the coincidence of true intuition and true tradition. This theory has made possible such a paradox as the Kabbalah of Isaac Luria . . . Nearly all the important points and major theses in Luria’s system are novel,

surprising discovery I had made: Sabbatian theology—that is, a messianic antinomianism that had developed within Judaism in strictly Jewish concepts.’ And Scholem’s comment in a letter from 6 Aug. 1917 to Gerda Goldberg in *Gershom Scholem: A Life in Letters*, 54: ‘More important than belief in God is whether you accept the Torah—which is to say, whether we make a *law*, or a metaphysically grounded *imperative*, an integral part of our lives because we submit ourselves unconditionally to a principle. . . . What is important for me is that we should submit our lives to laws—and not those of a “law book” but rather the deep laws of the spiritual world which I sense are active in Zionism’ (emphasis in original). Leaving aside the correctness of Scholem’s characterization of Zionism, what is important is that we can discern in these words a notion of lawfulness that is not limited to regulations and directives. For Scholem, Torah signifies law in the sense of a ‘metaphysically grounded imperative’. I note, finally, that in this matter, as in the case of many issues discussed by Scholem, he is not always consistent, for there are passages where he presents what he considers to be the antinomian element set in opposition to the tradition. Consider, for example, *Major Trends*, 318, where Scholem observes that the Frankist doctrine of the holiness of sin and the conception that transgressive acts must be practised with religious fervour ‘are radically opposed to everything which for centuries had formed the essence of moral teaching and speculation in Judaism. It is as if an anarchist rebellion had taken place within the world of Law.’ I do not think that the tension in Scholem can be resolved by arguing that in one passage he is speaking of Sabbatianism and in the other Frankism. It seems, rather, that Scholem genuinely contradicted himself, perhaps indicating willy-nilly that these matters defy a definitive and comprehensive clarification by historical/philological research.

¹⁷⁰ *On the Kabbalah*, 119.

one might even say excitingly novel—and yet they were accepted throughout as true Kabbalah, i.e. traditional wisdom.¹⁷¹

More specifically, according to Scholem, the implicit utopian element embraced by Lurianic kabbalists is predicated on an absorption of the anarchic tendencies within the Torah itself. The keen insight well grasped by Sabbatian thought is that the law most fully expresses its potentiality as law at the point when it exceeds the limits of its prescriptions; the law is affirmed in the negation of its restrictiveness.¹⁷²

Much is debatable in Scholem's characterizations of Lurianic kabbalah and its aftermath in Sabbatian messianism, but what seems to me basically sound is his recognition of a reaching beyond tradition that grounds the tradition transmitted as kabbalah. What is new is old—the more novel the more ancient. The secret truth of tradition must be discovered, but that discovery comes by way of re/covering tradition. This paradox, which figures prominently on the path of kabbalistic thinking, cannot be resolved as a conflict between innovative and conservative approaches, the revolutionary and the traditional. In Lurianic kabbalah, as in kabbalistic thinking more generally, to be radical means to be at the root of things. But what is at the root but the potentiality for change through the coming-to-be of that which has been? The theoretical point is anchored philologically, for the word 'radical' denotes fundamental and insurgent, constitutive and anarchical.

I am in basic agreement with the claim of Scholem, but I would suggest some changes in locution that may help us get beyond the polar logic that colours his dialectical approach. First, as I have already intimated, I do not think it advantageous to set conservative and innovative in opposition, for what is most radical is that which is at the root. Second, in place of Scholem's category antinomianism, I would suggest that the lawful confrontation with the limits of the law occasions a hypernomianism. From a kabbalistic perspective there can be a persuasive argument for one to surpass the laws, but always in tension with fulfilling them, and this most evidently in their abrogation.

Consider, for example, the following explanation of the commandment to heed the words of the prophet (Deut. 18: 15–19) offered by the anonymous author of the fifteenth-century kabbalistic treatise *Sefer ha-Qanah*:

¹⁷¹ *Major Trends*, 21–2.

¹⁷² See Scholem, *Messianic Idea*, 58–9. In that context, Scholem draws the explicit analogy between Paulinism and Sabbatianism. Analogies between key elements of the Sabbatian messianism and early Christianity, particularly as expressed in Paul, have been drawn elsewhere by Scholem and by a number of other scholars. See Scholem, *Major Trends*, 307; id., *Sabbatai Ševi*, 282–6, 332–54, 545–8, 795–9; id., *Messianic Idea*, 123–5; Wirszubski, *Between the Lines*, 131; Yerushalmi, *From Spanish Court*, 307, n. 11; Sharot, *Messianism*, 120. See also Davies, 'From Schweitzer'; Schweid, *Judaism and Mysticism*, 82–6; Elqayam, 'Mystery of Faith', 213–20; id., 'Sabbatai Ševi's Manuscript', 378–9; Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, 205–6.

Even if he tells you to transgress all of the Torah . . . ‘you shall heed him’ (Deut. 18: 15) provided that it is for the need of the moment (*šorekh sha‘ah*) . . . for there is a time when the fracture (*qilqul*) produces a great rectification (*tiqqun gadol*), when the fracture is for the moment, and if not for it, there would be another fracture for generations, it is better for there to be the momentary fracture, and by means of it there will be rectification. Thus [it says] ‘you shall heed him,’ for destruction that is set right cannot be compared to destruction that is not set right, as it damages momentarily (*pogem le-sha‘ah*).¹⁷³

The obligation to listen to a prophet chosen by God extends to the ostensible point of an antinomian abrogation of the entire Torah. A rationale is offered for this seemingly extreme application of the deuteronomistic injunction: better to endure a temporary fracture for the sake of the rectification rather than a more permanent fracture that has no possibility of repair. What is of special importance to this chapter is the fact that the apparent antinomianism contained in the prophet’s request to break the law is, in truth, a means to fulfil the law, and hence it would be more appropriate to refer to this gesture as hypernomian—what seems to be blatantly transgressive is, in fact, a more profound expression of obedience to the law.

The monistic orientation is not to be set in opposition to the dualistic—indeed, that would perforce undermine the monism. On the contrary, the urge for monism is enhanced by dualism, for to appreciate that all things are ultimately good, one must initially discern the distinction between good and evil, and this can only be realized (from the standpoint of traditional kabbalah) by adherence to religious ritual.¹⁷⁴ The tenor of Scholem’s discussions, by contrast, reflects a much sharper distinction between kabbalah and halakhah. It is of interest to note, parenthetically, that Tishby relates the Sabbatian orientation to exoteric (or halakhic) and esoteric (or kabbalistic) layers of the tradition to the distinction between Talmud and *Zohar*, halakhah and kabbalah, in the Christian kabbalists of Renaissance Italy and Germany. Tishby acknowledges, however, that at the peak of the movement Sabbatianism was firmly rooted in both halakhah and kabbalah, but in time the spiritualist tendency that set halakhah and kabbalah in pointed conflict became more prominent, reaching full expression in eighteenth-century Frankism.¹⁷⁵ Tishby’s remarks are doubly revealing. One wonders if Scholem’s

¹⁷³ *Sefer ha-Qanah*, 3a.

¹⁷⁴ It is of interest to note in this context the cautionary words of Kook, *Orot ha-Qodesh*, 3: 106–7. After having formulated the mystical belief in the underlying oneness of all things, which entails the mandate to elevate the mundane to the sacred, he quips: ‘But the way to this sublime level is through the channel of the intermediary path, which distinguishes between good and evil, for this elevates and raises the living light that is trapped in the depth of evil, and it links everything to the good.’

¹⁷⁵ Tishby, *Wisdom*, 27–8.

own portrayal of Sabbatianism is not coloured by Christian kabbalah, but, more importantly, Tishby has nuanced the argument in an illuminating way: Sabbatianism did not embrace the antinomian spiritualist tendency common to Christianity and Frankism. I have selected the word ‘hypernomian’ to refer to the Sabbatian paradox of breaking the law to fulfil it.

Although I would certainly assent to the view that the scholar of religion must be attentive to the specific historical circumstances that may help explain a particular religious phenomenon, I would counter that it is also necessary to be mindful of enduring sensibilities that help one understand a more immediate context. With respect to the present issue under discussion, I am not persuaded that the best approach to account for the hypernomian tendency in kabbalistic literature to extend the law beyond its own limits is due to any single historical event, even if I readily admit that the latter may have served as a catalyst to explain the form the tendency has taken or will take at any given moment. The seed for the hypernomianism espoused by kabbalists is planted in several isolated rabbinic dicta,¹⁷⁶ such as the audacious comment attributed to R. Joseph, ‘The commandments will be nullified in the future’, *mišwot beṭelot le’atit lavo*.¹⁷⁷ The specific rabbinic teaching that prompts the opinion attributed to R. Joseph is the view that a garment made from a mixed species can be used as shrouds to cover a corpse and need not be sold to an idolater or used to make a saddlecloth for a donkey. Since, from a biblical standpoint, it is forbidden to wear a garment made from mixed species (Lev. 19: 19), the presumption is that if such a garment can be used as shrouds, in the time of the resurrection the laws will be suspended. A more modest, but in some ways more puzzling, statement is transmitted in the name of R. Simeon ben Laqish (Reish Laqish), ‘There are occasions when the nullification of Torah is its foundation (*pe’amim she-biṭṭulah shel torah zehu yesodah*), as it is written, “[I will inscribe on the tablets the commandments that were on the first tablets] that you smashed” (Deut. 10: 2). The holy One, blessed be he, said to Moses, “Congratulations that you smashed [them]”.’¹⁷⁸ The midrashic reading of the scriptural verse, which buttresses the notion that God applauds the audacious act of Moses to break the first tablets of his own volition, is found in other redactional settings in rabbinic

¹⁷⁶ For discussion of many of the relevant passages, see reference to the works of Davies cited above, n. 101.

¹⁷⁷ Babylonian Talmud, Niddah 61*b*.

¹⁷⁸ Babylonian Talmud, Menaḥot 99*a–b*. Relevant to the discussion of rabbinic hypernomianism are discussions whether or not prophets, members of the court, and the rabbis themselves had the juridical authority to abrogate a scriptural injunction (*la’aqor davar min ha-torah*); see Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 90*a*, Yevamot 89*b*; Gilat, ‘Beit Din’; Ben-Menahem, *Judicial Deviation*, 141–79; Elon, *Jewish Law*, 531–6; Hayes, ‘Abrogation of Torah

material.¹⁷⁹ What is interesting is the use of this notion in the present literary context, which is related more specifically to the idea that the graphic image of smashing the tablets of the commandments, ostensibly an antinomian act, can in fact be in certain situations the very foundation of the law. To establish the law the law must be broken.¹⁸⁰ The notion of accomplishing the law by transgressing the law is applied in some contexts to the particular idea of *tiqqun olam*. These passages attest to the belief on the part of some rabbis that the need to behave in a manner that does not conform to the requirements of the law is at times necessary for the sake of promoting a greater sense of social well-being.¹⁸¹ The theme of realizing the potential of the law by means of its revocation is enunciated in another talmudic passage that is worthy of full citation:

Law', 643–74; Hammer-Kossov, 'Divine Justice', 58–103. Especially interesting with respect to the temporary uprooting of law is the rabbinic understanding of prophetic licence reflected in the comment in *Sifre on Deuteronomy*, § 175, p. 221 "You shall heed him" (Deut 18:15), even if he says to you to transgress one of the commandments mentioned in the Torah like Elijah on Mount Carmel. According to [the needs of] the hour (*lefi sha'ah*) you should listen to him.' Compare parallel in Babylonian Talmud, Yevamot 90b: 'Come and listen: "You shall heed him," even if he tells you to transgress one of the commandments of the Torah like Elijah on Mount Carmel. Everything in accord with [the needs of] the hour—you should listen to him. In this case it is different since it is written "You shall heed him." [Should we not] learn from it? To fence in the matter is different.' See also Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 90a: 'If a prophet says to you "Transgress the words of the Torah," listen to him with the exception of idolatry.' Elijah's offering a sacrifice outside the confines of the Jerusalem temple serves as a model for pious transgression, that is, it is permissible for the prophet to break a law temporarily if it is for the sake of preventing a greater infraction that would threaten the foundation of the faith. The same principle is articulated in the baraita transmitted in the name of Eliezer ben Jacob in Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 46a (parallel in Yevamot 90b): 'I have heard that the court gives lashes and punishes [in a manner] not from the Torah. This is not to transgress the words of Torah but in order to create a fence for the Torah.' See also Megillat Ta'anit 6: 5, where the teaching of Eliezer ben Jacob (in a somewhat modified form) is succeeded by a similar remark transmitted in the name of R. Simeon from the 'house of Levi'. In this case, the excessive behavior of the courts is justified exegetically by the verse 'and you should remove the evil from your midst' (Deut. 21: 21), that is, the demands of the moment (in technical rabbinic locution, *hora'at sha'ah*, the 'temporary edict') required extreme behaviour that seemingly goes against the scriptural guidelines for appropriate legal action.

¹⁷⁹ Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 87a; Yevamot 62a; Bava Batra 14b; *Avot de Rabbi Natan*, version A, ch. 2, pp. 9–10; *Deuteronomy Rabbah* 5: 13.

¹⁸⁰ In his commentary to the relevant passage in the Babylonian Talmud, Menaḥot 99b, s.v., *she-biṭṭulah shel torah*, Rashi explains that nullification of the law consists of interrupting the study of Torah for the sake of performing altruistic acts of kindness such as accompanying the body of the deceased or going out to greet the bride. The one who interrupts his study to accomplish such tasks receives the reward as if he were studying. In my judgement, the intent of the talmudic dictum is more radical than the explanation proposed by this eleventh-century exegete. The issue seems to me a more fundamental abrogation of the law, which is tellingly captured in the violent act of smashing the tablets.

¹⁸¹ Tosefta, Terumot 1: 14; Ketubot 1: 14, 12: 1; Gitṭin 3: 8; Babylonian Talmud, Pesahim 82b; Ḥagigah 2b; Gitṭin 40b; *Sifre on Deuteronomy*, § 113, p. 173. The rabbinic conception of *tiqqun*

It is written, 'It is time to act for the Lord, for they have violated your Torah' (Ps. 119: 26). Rava said: this verse can be interpreted from the beginning to the end or from the end to the beginning. Interpreting it from the beginning to the end: 'It is time to act for the Lord.' Why? 'For they have violated your Torah.' Interpreting it from the end to the beginning: 'For they have violated your Torah.' Why? Because 'it is time to act for the Lord.'¹⁸²

The second alternative proposed in the name of Rava betrays a bold reading of the law against itself insofar as the occasion may indeed arise that calls for the abrogation of the law in an effort to act on behalf of the lawgiver. As discussed below, this orientation evolves in a variety of different ways in the later kabbalistic sources, but it reaches a crescendo in the Sabbatian material wherein the cancellation of the law is related to the motif of the suffering messiah, the righteous saviour who must endure the travails of the material world of darkness to rectify the primordial sin of Adam, the act that caused the brokenness of the human condition. What is necessary to reiterate at this juncture is that the possibility that fulfilment of the ritual law can come about through its abrogation is a mode of reasoning found in some earlier rabbinic sources, which doubtless had an impact on subsequent kabbalistic writers.

Indeed, one might go so far as to say that a number of rabbis discerned that the limits of law itself are established by the very possibility of their being exceeded. In this respect, we can speak of the inversion of values that leads one beyond the customary duality of the sanctioned and prohibited as an integral part of the moral and religious law as it was understood by rabbinic authorities.¹⁸³ In support of this orientation, it is of interest to mention a passage cited in the name of the rabbis by a number of kabbalists and talmudic commentators in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, for instance, Jacob ben Sheshet,¹⁸⁴ Baḥya ben Asher¹⁸⁵ Menaḥem

olam is more fully developed by Maimonides, for whom this expression denotes the principle of reasoning guiding political and judicial discretion with the aim of enhancing social order. See Lorberbaum, 'Maimonides' Conception'.

¹⁸² Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 63a.

¹⁸³ It is of interest to recall that Nietzsche perceived the 'inversion of values', which constitutes a 'grand style in morality', as the distinctive contribution of Jews to European culture. See *Beyond Good and Evil*, § 195, p. 108, and § 250, p. 185. While Nietzsche surely was not cognizant of the passages in the rabbinic corpus that speak dialectically of fulfilling the law through its abrogation, I believe these sources lend even greater support to his insight regarding the inversion of values central to the Jewish ethos.

¹⁸⁴ Jacob ben Sheshet, *Meshiv Devarim Nekhoḥim*, 81. For discussion of this motif and the sources I have mentioned, see Mark, 'Kabbalistic *Tocinofobia*', 179–83.

¹⁸⁵ *Rabbenu Baḥya: Be'ur al ha-Torah*, 2: 459 (ad Lev. 11: 7). Baḥya's explanation is based on the words of Jacob ben Sheshet (see previous note); see Gottlieb, *Kabbalah in the Writings of R. Baḥya*, 117.

Recanaṭi,¹⁸⁶ Abba Mari of Lunel,¹⁸⁷ Yom Tov Ibn Ishbili,¹⁸⁸ and Meir ben Solomon Meiri,¹⁸⁹ concerning the presumed etymology of the word for pig, *ḥazir*, ‘for in the future God will restore it (*lehaḥziro*) to us’.¹⁹⁰ Baḥya criticizes the masses for interpreting the presumed rabbinic statement as asserting that the pig will become pure for Israel; he attempts to neutralize the ostensible antinomianism by referring symbolically to the spiritual force of the pig rather than to the animal itself, that is, in the messianic future the force of the pig, which corresponds to the kingdom of Edom, a well-attested cipher for Christendom,¹⁹¹ together with all the other forces will assist rather than harm the Jewish people. Baḥya’s effort to mitigate the latent antinomianism notwithstanding, it seems that this statement, if it is indeed an authentic rabbinic dictum, affirms the possibility of a radical shift such that the paradigmatically forbidden animal, the pig, is transformed into a ritually fit animal.¹⁹² According to the locution that I have adopted, this is an illustration of hypernomianism, for the restoration of the pig to holiness indicates an expanding of the boundaries so that what now appears as impure will be pure in the messianic future. As noted below, this is precisely how kabbalists interpreted the matter at a later time.

¹⁸⁶ Recanaṭi, *Perush al ha-Torah*, 60c.

¹⁸⁷ Abba Mari of Lunel, *Minḥat Qena’ot*, ch. 2, p. 232.

¹⁸⁸ Yom Tov Ibn Ishbili, *Hiddushim al Massekhet Qiddushin*, 49b.

¹⁸⁹ Meiri, *Beit ha-Beḥirah al Massekhet Ta’anit*, 81.

¹⁹⁰ See also Gikatilla, *Sha’arei Seder*, 14a; and Ibn Shaprut, ‘*La Piedra de Toque*’, 63. The connection between the word *ḥazir*, ‘pig’, and the verb *lehaḥazir*, ‘to restore’, is found in *Ecclesiastes Rabbah* 1: 9; *Leviticus Rabbah* 13: 5, p. 295, and see n. 2 *ad loc.* for reference to other relevant sources. This wordplay of *ḥazir* and *lehaḥazir* is also evident in the description of the body of the Gentile in contrast to the body of the Jew in *Zohar* 1: 20b: ‘his garment and body are the “flesh of the pig” (*besar ḥazir*; cf. Isa. 65: 4, 66: 17), it is called *ḥazir* within the flesh, which is his body. Thus these two aspects are separated, the ones are comprised within the mystery of Adam and the others in the mystery of impurity. Each thing follows its own kind and it is restored (*ithadar*) to its kind.’ See also the formulation in Eybeschuetz, *Ya’arot Devash*, 2: 219: ‘It is known that the pig has good and bad, for one sign is pure and another impure.’

¹⁹¹ On the identification of Edom and the pig, linked exegetically to the midrashic explanation of the name *ḥazir* as that which ‘restores the diadem to its owner’, *she-maḥazir aṭarah le-va’alah* (cf. reference to *Leviticus Rabbah* in previous note), see Ibn Shu’eib, *Derashot al ha-Torah*, 247. See also references to Ritba and Meiri cited above in nn. 188–9.

¹⁹² For an illuminating discussion of the role of the pig as the marker of ethnic identity of Jews in European Christian culture, see Fabre-Vassas, *Singular Beast*. On the association of Jews and the lore of the pig-faced lady, see Bondeson, *Two-Headed Boy*, 119. On the use of the image of the pig in negative stereotyping of Christians on the part of medieval Jewish writers, see Cuffel ‘*Filthy Words/Filthy Bodies*’, 457–62.

AESTHETIC IMPULSE AND LAWFUL VENTURING
BEYOND THE LAW

From the rabbinic texts discussed above we can adduce the following principle: to transgress is to overstep one's boundary, but by stepping over one's boundary one preserves the line that circumscribes the being of one's transgression.¹⁹³ One is here reminded of Rainer Maria Rilke's description of Orpheus, *Und er gehorcht, indem er überschreitet*, 'And he obeys, even as he oversteps the bounds'.¹⁹⁴ The poetic inspiration that ensues from playing the lyre necessitates overstepping the bounds of language on the part of the bard, even as he obeys the laws of rhythmic structure and metrical cadence.¹⁹⁵ As Rilke himself formulates the axiom of transgression, *Kundiger böge die Zweige der Weiden, wer die Wurzeln der Weiden erfuhr*, 'Whoever's known the roots of the willow is better trained to bend the willow's limbs'.¹⁹⁶ Reversing the order of Rilke's maxim, it might be said that only by bending the limb does one truly know the root, which is a perfectly apt way to convey the idea that the law most fully attains its lawful status in surpassing the limits of its sanctions; the law is avowed in the breaching of its borders. The tragedy, as Wittgenstein puts it, is 'where the tree, instead of bending, breaks. Tragedy is something un-Jewish', *daß sich der Baum nicht biegt, sondern bricht. Die Tragödie ist etwas unjüdisches*.¹⁹⁷ Perceptively, Wittgenstein links the 'Jewish' orientation to the

¹⁹³ For a profitable discussion of this dialectic, aptly referred to as the 'ideology of transgression', see Faure, *Red Thread*, 98–143.

¹⁹⁴ Rilke, *Duino Elegies*, 92–3. On the figure of Orpheus as the embodiment of poetry in the work of Rilke, see Kosinski, *Orpheus*, 254–8.

¹⁹⁵ Rilke's image of the attunement to the lyre as a trope for poetic inspiration may be indebted to the statement of Heraclitus: 'They do not comprehend how a thing agrees at variance with itself: <it is> an attunement turning back <on itself>', like that of the bow and the lyre.' See Kahn, *Art and Thought of Heraclitus*, 195. The Heraclitean notion of harmony, perhaps in response to Pythagorean ideas of music, involves agreement and disagreement, consonance and dissonance, coming-together and coming-apart. For further discussion, see *ibid.* 195–200, 284–5. On the image of the 'tensed bow string' that is 'ready for the impact of plucking' as the dominant metaphor for music in the ancient Greek and medieval European paradigm, see Pickstock, 'Ascending Numbers', 186–7. It is of interest to consider the gloss on the statement of Heraclitus offered by Nietzsche, *Pre-Platonic Philosophers*, 66: 'Good and evil come together in the same thing after the fashion of bow and lyre.' On the convergence of opposites in the thought of Heraclitus, see *id.*, *Philosophy in the Tragic Age*, 54. Also relevant is the discussion of harmony as the 'struggling-apart' in Heidegger and Fink, *Heraclitus Seminar*, 158–9. The impact of Heraclitus on Rilke's notion of cosmic harmony has been noted by Haar, *Song of the Earth*, 132.

¹⁹⁶ Rilke, *Duino Elegies*, 94–5. On the image of breaking the 'unfortunate lyres', see the remark of Hölderlin cited in Dilthey, *Poetry and Experience*, 323.

¹⁹⁷ Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 1.

bending of the tree, stretching beyond limits, rather than breaking the tree, digging up and destroying the root. The inherently transgressive nature of this bending resonates with Wittgenstein's comments about music, a form of language that does not function as a vehicle for the communication of data or the representation of objects,¹⁹⁸ and thus defies the rules of the language-game (*Sprachspiel*). 'Soulful expression in music—this cannot be recognized by rules (*Der seelenvolle Ausdruck in der Musik,—er ist doch nicht nach Regeln zu erkennen*). . . . The way music speaks. Do not forget that a poem, even though it is composed in the language of information (*der Sprache der Mitteilung*), is not used in the language-game of giving information.'¹⁹⁹ Wittgenstein does not set music and conventional forms of linguistic discourse in diametric opposition. On the contrary, he explicitly affirms that there is a musical element in 'verbal language' (*Wortsprache*) and that 'signs of understanding' (*Zeichen des Verständnisses*) may accompany the hearing of music.²⁰⁰ Indeed, for Wittgenstein, 'understanding a musical phrase may also be called understanding a *language*',²⁰¹ but the language of music is the 'linguistic expression of enchantment' (*sprachlichen Ausdruck des Entzückens*) that is not discernible through conventional rules of the language-game.²⁰²

Interestingly enough, on the basis of a careful reading of passages from Goethe's *Faust*, Ernst Bloch similarly referred to the 'poetic venturing beyond the limits',²⁰³ which he also relates specifically to music:

It sings as unrestrained exodus and as extract, music is the supreme art of utopian venturing beyond, whether it drifts or builds. The layer of sound is certainly not always unrestrained . . . but more than anywhere else all figures of venturing beyond the limits are accommodated, indeed even arrive in it. . . . *all venturers beyond the limits to the absolute moment are also tonal characters*. . . . The venturers beyond the limits cross into this sphere from their moral sphere; provided that the tonal layer has not become a linguistic and depictive space *sui generis*, part of a different creation of environment.²⁰⁴

Music provides the means through which one advances beyond the limits of the moral sphere to a realm that transcends language. The 'latent expressive power' of music that 'goes far beyond all known words' encapsulates the

¹⁹⁸ For discussion of this theme, see Walton, 'Listening with Imagination'; id., *Mimesis*.

¹⁹⁹ Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, 28.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.* 29.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.* 30 (emphasis in original).

²⁰² *Ibid.*

²⁰³ Bloch, *Principle of Hope*, 1056. Compare the formulation of Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 141: 'Poets who are of the more venturesome kind are under way on the track of the holy because they experience the unholy as such.'

²⁰⁴ *Principle of Hope*, 1057 (emphasis in original).

utopian striving to exceed all limitation.²⁰⁵ The ‘most characteristic aspiration of music’, therefore, is for it ‘to be, to find, to become, language sui generis. Indeed because the expressive power of music lies beyond all known names, in the end expression in music is no longer under discussion at all but *music itself as expression*.’²⁰⁶ Insofar as music goes towards its own language, which is a poesis that moves away from the limits of verbal expression,²⁰⁷ it follows that it is one of the most appropriate aesthetic forms to capture the stimulus of mystical proclivity.²⁰⁸ The point is well captured by Henry Corbin, who remarked, ‘though the mystic must sing in order to say, since mystical meaning is essentially musical, this meaning still remains ineffable. As soon as we make so bold as to communicate it, to reveal that fugitive instant where it seems that “the soul becomes visible to the body,” then the secret escapes us.’²⁰⁹ The communication of the secret is by nature an act of transgression, for the secret is that which cannot be divulged. Music, too, embodies an irreducibly transgressive quality, which is expressed by Bloch in the statement that the ‘tension of sound passes from being physical to being psychological’, for the ‘most characteristic feature of melody’ is that ‘in each one of its tones the next one is latently audible, lies in the anticipating person, therefore in the expression, which is here above all a humanized expression’.²¹⁰ The transgressive character of music is related inextricably to the transcendence of a linear mode of communicative speech by an even more elemental rhythmic and sequential discourse. As Jean-François Lyotard has put the matter:

²⁰⁵ Ibid. 1069. On the power of music to broaden localized ritual experiences in contrast to the tendency to exhibit a global ontology, see Bohlman, ‘World Musics’.

²⁰⁶ Bloch, *Principles of Hope*, 1069. On the distinction between music, which is privileged as the most important form of art, and language, see the pertinent remarks of Schopenhauer, *World as Will*, 2: 447–57, esp. 448–9. Schopenhauer’s view reflects a position taken by a number of figures in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, including Rousseau and Herder, who accorded to music (or poetry as lyrical speech) priority over verbal language. See Bowie, *From Romanticism*, 61–4. On the contrast between music and language, see also Zuckerkandl, *Sound and Symbol*, 67–9, and 361 where the author concludes that the critical difference between high and low tones does not fit into the quantitative or qualitative differences articulated by standard modes of linguistic discourse. For another attempt to probe the epistemological value of truth in music, see Levinson, *Music, Art, and Metaphysics*, 279–305.

²⁰⁷ A similar point is made by Theodor Adorno’s contrast of ‘intentional language’ (*meinende Sprache*) and the ‘linguistic character’ (*Sprachähnlichkeit*) of music: the former ‘tries to approximate but fails’, since ‘the absolute slips away from every finite intention’, whereas the latter ‘meets the absolute directly, but fails to communicate it’. See Zuidervaart, *Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory*, 127. On the language-character of music, see also Paddison, *Adorno’s Aesthetics*, 143–4.

²⁰⁸ See Underhill, *Mysticism*, 76–80; and the rich analyses in Godwin, *Harmonies*. See also Nasr, *Islamic Art*, 151–74.

²⁰⁹ Corbin, *Voyage*, 235–6.

²¹⁰ *Principle of Hope*, 1062.

It is true that the discourse of music does not refer to a referent in the same way that language does. Nevertheless, music appears as a temporal organization (diachronic, like speech) of discontinuous elements (*articoli*, the notes) defined, like phonemes, by their place in a system (the scale and the rules of harmony). In music the work of the unconscious produces effects of meaning by transgressing diverse levels: temporal organization (rhythm, development), steps between the elements (the scale), discontinuity between the elements (existence of notes), composition of elements out of other elements, sonorous material of so-called musical objects. Let us reverse the proposition: every transgression of this type is equal to a trace of the primary process; that is, a transgression makes the listener grasp the secondary, the 'linguistic,' the 'written' character of the music to which his ear is attuned and in which this trace is marked. Such transgressions then have a critical function, at least as long as they are not in turn connoted, that is, replaced in a new language as a constitutive operation, such as a rhetorical one, although they may be more elementary.²¹¹

The 'critical reversal' occasioned by the musical object, in contrast to the linguistic object, to displace figural signification by affective tension results from the 'double demand' that 'corresponds to the compromise between a system that allows the production of recognizable musical "discourses" and the "free play" of transgressive operations in relation to that system'.²¹² The narrative composition of musical sound thus points to its ability to extend beyond the limits, but only by conforming to strict laws of harmony.²¹³ As Lyotard deftly puts the matter, obviously reflecting the interpretation of Greek tragedy on the part of Nietzsche as reconciliation between the Apolline and Dionysian impulses:²¹⁴ 'The cry of Dionysus is where we hear the words of Apollo. And, inversely, the Apollonian harmony is where we hear the Bacchic delirium.'²¹⁵

From the rhetoric of music, then, we can adduce the operative principle that exemption from law, or what may be more suitably called the melodics of constricting expansion, is not only part of the law, but its bud and flower, its origin and destination. This insight was expressed in slightly different terms by Theodor Adorno, who viewed the aesthetic form in general, and music in particular, as an expression of the negative dialectic that tradition is preserved through its being rejected.²¹⁶ In a remarkable aphorism in his unfinished

²¹¹ Lyotard, *Toward the Postmodern*, 42.

²¹² *Ibid.* 46.

²¹³ On the nexus between narrativity, music, and transcendence, see Ellison, 'Narrative and Music'.

²¹⁴ The thesis is worked out most fully in Nietzsche's *Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik*. For discussion of Nietzsche's theory of art, with particular reference to music, and the transvaluation of values, see Spariosu, *Dionysus Reborn*, 70–7.

²¹⁵ Lyotard, *Toward the Postmodern*, 58. In a measure, the words of Lyotard reflect Nietzsche's insight regarding the origin of poetry in *The Gay Science*, § 84, pp. 138–40.

²¹⁶ See Birus, 'Adorno's "Negative Aesthetics"?', 142–4.

work on Beethoven, entitled 'On the metaphysics of musical time', Adorno describes the constructive power of music in terms of its destructive tendencies; music thus expresses the fundamental rhythm of time for it persists in its passing. An essential correlation between music and time is already evident in Adorno's first major published work, a study on Kierkegaard's aesthetics:

Aesthetic ideas are for Kierkegaard *universalia post rem*, achieved through the exclusion of historically specific elements. His aesthetics thereby becomes ensnared in a nominalism that ultimately robs it of its object. What truly endures in artworks is not that from which time has been abstracted; in its emptiness it falls most completely to the mercy of time. Those motives assert themselves whose eternity is most deeply embedded in the constellation of the temporal and is most faithfully maintained in their ciphers. Artworks do not obey the power of the universality of ideas. Their center is the temporal and the particular, whose figuration they are; what they mean that is more than this, they mean exclusively through this figure. Every division of the arts into the abstract and concrete remains, along with the hierarchy of their 'eternity,' inessential because concretion is required in every artwork and on no account limited to language. Once again, music contradicts Kierkegaard's definitions.²¹⁷

In a later study, Adorno links this idea to an ancient rabbinic teaching regarding the group of angels that are created afresh each day to utter a new song before God and immediately perish after their task has been accomplished,²¹⁸ which he attributes to the lore of Jewish mysticism:

Relate the end of my study to the teaching of Jewish mysticism about the grass angels, who are created for an instant only to perish in the sacred fire.²¹⁹ Music—modeled on the glorification of God, even, and especially, when it opposes the world—resembles

²¹⁷ Adorno, *Kierkegaard*, 21. On the nexus of time and music, consider the characteristically provocative comment in Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 269: 'This once-and-for-all of pleasure, this interlacing of different time frames can be expressed only in music.'

²¹⁸ *Genesis Rabbah* 78: 1, pp. 916–17; Babylonian Talmud, *Ḥagigah* 14a, *Ḥullin* 91b; Ginzberg, *Legends*, 5: 21, n. 62, 24, n. 69. See also *Exodus Rabbah* 15: 6, where the angels who perish after having fulfilled their liturgical obligation are said to be resurrected on the next day, a theme that is meant to give hope to Israel (compared to angelic beings) who will be forgiven in spite of their transgressions. The rabbinic legend is cited as well by Benjamin in his 1931 essay on Karl Kraus. See Benjamin, *Reflections*, 273, and discussion in Handelman, *Fragments*, 17.

²¹⁹ Some of the rabbinic sources that served as the basis for this tradition are listed in the previous note. Adorno's rendering of the mythical idea, especially the description of the angels being made out of grass and being consumed in sacred fire, reflects the reworking of this aggadic motif in *Zohar* 1: 19a; hence his reference to 'Jewish mysticism' as the origin of the idea. He learnt of this passage from reading the translation included in Scholem's *Die Geheimnisse der Tora*. The precise words of the zoharic passage relate to the four forms (*diyot*), i.e. the angelic images of the chariot, that emerge from the divine realm as translucent lights. These lights produce seed in the world and thus they are denoted by the biblical locution 'seed-bearing plants', *esev mazri'a zera* (Gen. 1: 11). Evidently, the word *esev* has been rendered literally as 'grass', and thus the celestial beings are identified as 'grass angels'.

these angels. Their very transience, their ephemerality, is glorification. That is, the incessant destruction of nature. Beethoven raised this figure to musical self-consciousness. His truth is the destruction of the particular. He composed to its end the absolute transience of music. The fire which, according to his stricture against weeping, is to be struck from a man's soul, is the 'fire which consumes [nature]'.²²⁰

The issue of the law and its being trespassed is perfectly analogous to the problem of language and its transcendence. In a passage from another essay, 'Sacred Fragment: Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron*', which is dedicated to Scholem, Adorno relates that the composer's work expresses the view that music facilitates envisioning what cannot be envisioned: 'If the text creates the theological scandal of speaking of the One God as the idea [*Gedanken*], then this is a scandal that is duplicated in the texture of the music, though rendered almost unrecognizable by the power of the art. The absolute which this music sets out to make real, without any sleight of hand, it achieves as its own idea of itself: it is itself an image of something without images.'²²¹ Schoenberg establishes a unique relationship between Judaism and music on the grounds that the latter is an 'imageless art' and it is thus excluded from the prohibition on making images (Exod. 20: 4).

The experience of the ineffable marks the limit of human language, but the only way to approach that limit is through language, that is to say, the unsayable is inaccessible except by way of what is spoken, albeit spoken as that which cannot be said.²²² Echoing a sentiment expressed by a number of scholars,²²³ Michel Foucault noted that the 'characteristic movement of mysticism is to attempt to join—even if it means crossing the night—the positivity of an existence by opening a difficult line of communication with

²²⁰ Adorno, *Beethoven*, 176–7.

²²¹ Id., *Quasi una Fantasia*, 229.

²²² For a richly nuanced discussion of the tension between speech and the ineffable, see Sells, *Mystical Languages*. See also the account of Pseudo-Dionysus the Areopagite offered by Turner, *Eros and Allegory*, 56: 'The *via negativa* is not the way simply of saying nothing about God, but the encounter with the failure of what we *must* say about God to represent God adequately. If talk about God is deficient, this is a discovery made within the extending of it into superfluity, into that excess in which it simply collapses under its own weight' (emphasis in original). For a more elaborate discussion, see id., *Darkness of God*, 19–49, esp. 38–9.

²²³ On the criterion of ineffability in the study of the mystical phenomenon, see James, *Varieties*, 371; Underhill, *Mysticism*, 79–80; Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, 55, 79, 89, 93, 111, 132, 252, 277–306; Katz, 'Mystical Speech'; Matilal, 'Mysticism and Ineffability'; and the study of Sells cited in the previous note. The intellectual background of the Neoplatonic tradition for the emphasis on apophysis in the history of Western Christian mysticism is explored in a striking way by Derrida, 'How To Avoid Speaking'. The essay is reprinted with other valuable discussions of this theme in *Derrida and Negative Theology*. For more general discussions of the role of the unspeakable in the study of religious experience, see Scharfstein, *Ineffability*; Kalamaras, *Reclaiming*.

it'.²²⁴ The existence toward which the mystic strives is compared by Foucault to a shelter that is 'created as much by the law of the Word as by the open expanse of silence. For in the form of the experience, silence is the immeasurable, inaudible, primal breath from which all manifest discourse issues; or, speech is a reign with the power to hold itself in silent suspense.'²²⁵ The preponderant use of symbols on the part of mystics is rooted in the recognition that the object of their experience is a mystery that inescapably exceeds the boundary of language. In the words of Michel de Certeau, mystical language is characterized by a 'split structure', for the 'only way to establish a 'symbolic' expression is to separate two terms that are necessary, but contrary to each other'. Thus, mystical speech is always a 'manifestation of a cut', and consequently the ineffable is 'not so much an object of discourse as a marker of the status of language'.²²⁶ In a similar fashion, Scholem repeatedly emphasized in his work that symbolic language is employed by mystics (especially conspicuous in kabbalists) to render transparent that which is beyond all expression, to communicate the incommunicable.²²⁷ The transparency of the symbol relates to the paradoxical necessity of expressing the inexpressible by means of the self-disclosure of that which is concealed.²²⁸ In the very utterance of speech, therefore, language opens up to its own boundlessness, the silence whence the continuous streaming forth of language proceeds.²²⁹ As Heidegger poetically expressed the matter: 'Thinking's saying would be stilled in its being only by becoming unable to say that which must

²²⁴ Foucault, *Blanchot*, 53.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*

²²⁶ De Certeau, 'History and Mysticism', 443.

²²⁷ Scholem, *Major Trends*, 27; *id.*, 'Name of God', 61; *On the Kabbalah*, 22, 35–6, 52–3. For a representative sampling of scholarly discussions of Scholem's theory of symbolism in the kabbalistic material, see Rotenstreich, 'Symbolism and Transcendence'; Biale, *Gershom Scholem*, 90–2, 123–4; Schweid, *Judaism and Mysticism*, 42–3, 126–7; Dan, *Gershom Scholem*, 162–4; Gruenwald, 'Jewish Mysticism's Transition', 30–6; Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, 200–34; *id.*, 'Function of Symbols'; Handelman, *Fragments*, 76–7, 83–4, 104–15.

²²⁸ Scholem, 'Name of God', 165. Scholem's perspective has been repeated by Tishby, *Paths of Faith*, 11–22; *id.*, *Wisdom*, 285; Dan, *On Sanctity*, 45–8, 77–80, 107, 108–30, 373–4, 382–3; *id.*, *Jewish Mysticism*, 3: 131–59.

²²⁹ It is possible to understand Wittgenstein's celebrated recognition of the limits of what can be said precisely in terms of the symbolic apprehension of the silence that lies beyond language, but which is apprehended only in dialectical relation to what is spoken. Consider, for example, the succinct account given by Fiumara, *Symbolic Function*, 37: 'A concern with the search for limits may be understood as the negative utterance (or establishment) of those vast expanses for which neither the language of science nor everyday language can find an expression possessed of sense. The very fact that there is, in Wittgenstein's thought, no explicit denial of the meaningfulness of forms of expression not provided for either in consensually accepted usage or by the governing of logic seems in itself a tacit recognition of an irrepressible human creativity. In other words, it is the unveiling of something else which will not be denied, which will not be

remain unspoken. Such inability would bring thinking face to face with its matter. What is spoken is never, and in no language, what is said.²³⁰

The articulation of that which cannot be articulated, not in the sense of marking the presence that is absent but rather in removing the possibility of a presence that is present in any way but as absence, is the unique turn of the path beyond the modernist aesthetic. As Lyotard expressed the matter: 'The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable.'²³¹ In a book published several years ago, a contemporary philosopher, Stephen Ross, remarked that pushing to the limit is basic to the very nature of reason as judgemental. In its quest for truth, reason is guided by aporia, the critical suspension of belief that propels the beginning of the way of inquiry and delimits the end. In its composition of truth, therefore, reason is dependent on the disruptive capacity of doubt to displace certainties in order to illumine the untruths of truth and the misrepresentations of representation.²³² When judged from this perspective the faculty of rational judgement itself plays a transgressive role in the human desire to acquire knowledge. Articulating this position, Ross writes:

nullified by any restrictive boundary: on the contrary, it is actually highlighted precisely because it is *other* than that which is contained within the limit itself' For a fuller discussion of the function of silence, see id., *Other Side of Language*, 95–112. On the mystical elements in Wittgenstein's linguistic philosophy, see Nieli, *Wittgenstein*; Sontag, *Wittgenstein*; Popov, 'Wittgenstein's Analytic'. On the limits of language in Wittgenstein's thought, see Hagberg, *Art as Language*, 8–30, 118–35. For a different perspective regarding Wittgenstein's propensity for the mystical overcoming of language, born in the alienation of the solitary self, see Gellner, *Language and Solitude*, 59–67.

²³⁰ Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 11.

²³¹ Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, 81. Implicit in Lyotard's remarks is the reluctance to distinguish too sharply between modernity and postmodernity in terms of historical periodization, which he depicts as an obsession of modernity. See id., *Inhuman*, 25: 'When this argument is applied to modernity, the result is that neither modernity nor so-called postmodernity can be identified and defined as clearly circumscribed historical entities, of which the latter would always come "after" the former. Rather we have to say that the postmodern is always implied in the modern because of the fact that modernity, modern temporality, comprises in itself an impulsion to exceed itself into a state other than itself. . . . Modernity is constitutionally and ceaselessly pregnant with its postmodernity.' See *ibid.* 34: 'Postmodernity is not a new age, but the rewriting of some of the features claimed by modernity, and first of all modernity's claim to ground its legitimacy on the project of liberating humanity as a whole through science and technology. But as I have said, that rewriting has been at work, for a long time now, in modernity itself.' For a similar reservation with respect to the historical periodization, see Derrida, *Ear of the Other*, 84.

²³² Ross, *Ring of Representation*, 45. For a fuller treatment of this theme, see id., *Metaphysical Aporia*. See also Derrida, *Aporias*.

The generality of philosophy both fails to provide undivided representations and divides the dividedness in reason and truth into aporia. Aporia sounds the music of truth. It echoes transgression. Aporia finds itself where representation reaches its limits and displaces itself. . . . Aporia stands at the site where philosophy acknowledges the limits of its multiple representations. . . . The limits of representation, limitation, judgment, reason, and truth are transgressed within every particular mode of judgment and truth. This may be understood not as a representation of limitation but as the capacity of judgment and reason to sacrifice themselves to establish their truth. In this sense, intermodality and multimodality resound among the untruths that compose truth.²³³

The postmodern dynamic of establishing the limit by exceeding the bound, which allows for the letting-go of truth in the taking-hold of untruth, provides an adequate way to formulate the dialectic of hypernomianism that is a prominent feature of kabbalah. The paradox to which I am alluding may be expressed in terms of Franz Kafka's well-known parable from *The Trial*, 'Before the Law'. Kafka refers to this text in the entry to his diary dated 13 December 1914 as *die Legende*,²³⁴ apparently an independent piece that he incorporated into the last chapter of *The Trial* in the dialogue between the protagonist, Joseph K., accused and presumed by the court of law (*Gericht*) to be guilty, and the prison chaplain, a dialogue that, revealingly, takes place in the cathedral.²³⁵ The legend demands from the reader not only suspension of logic but blurring the distinction between language and reality. In presuming the parabolic nature of being, Kafka closes the gap separating fact and fiction and thereby opens the fount of ancient Jewish gnosis that achieves its fullest force in the symbolic imagination of medieval kabbalists.²³⁶ The point was

²³³ *Ring of Representation*, 45–7.

²³⁴ Kafka, *Tagebücher*, 448; English version in id., *Diaries*, 321: 'Instead of working—I have written only one page (exegesis of the "Legend")—looked through the finished chapters and found parts of them good. Always conscious that every feeling of satisfaction and happiness that I have, such, for example, as the "Legend" in particular inspires in me, must be paid for, and must be paid for moreover at some future time, in order to deny me all possibility of recovery in the present.'

²³⁵ On the centrality of paradox to the parable and its literary independence of the setting in which it appears, see Kirchnerberger, *Franz Kafka's Use of Law*, 100. For the literary history of the parable, see *ibid.* 498, n. 87.

²³⁶ The characterization of Kafka's understanding of truth as unrealizable and incommunicable in light of the fundamental paradox that marks the way of the kabbalistic orientation has been discussed by a number of scholars, including Scholem. See e.g. the latter's remark in *Walter Benjamin*, 125: 'I am reminded of one of my own statements, also from the thirties, that students of mine used to quote. Apparently I told them that in order to understand the Kabbalah, nowadays one had to read Franz Kafka's writings first, particularly *The Trial*.' See Handelman, *Fragments*, 48. Bloom, *Ruin the Sacred Truths*, 168, has argued that Scholem's interpretation of kabbalah was determined by the early influence of Kafka, a point that Scholem himself made explicit on a number of occasions (see below, nn. 288–92). It is of interest to consider Kafka's

deftly expressed by Adorno in a letter he wrote to Scholem on 14 April 1939 thanking the latter for having received a copy of *Die Geheimnisse der Tora*. This work, which was published in 1936,²³⁷ included a translation of a passage from zoharic literature upon which Adorno thus commented:²³⁸ ‘The extract you have translated is an interpretation of the history of creation as a “symbol.” However, the language into which the symbol is translated is itself a mere symbolic language, which calls to mind Kafka’s statement that all his works were symbolic, but only in the sense that they were to be interpreted by new symbols in an endless series of steps.’²³⁹

At a crucial point in the narrative, K. confides to the priest that he trusts him more than the other members of the court. To this the priest, predictably but still unexpectedly, replies that K. should not deceive himself about the court, a delusion described in the writings that preface the law, in the words ‘before the Law stands a doorkeeper’, *Vor dem Gesetz steht ein Türhüter*.²⁴⁰ With this statement the text shifts from the parable of the narrative to the narrative of the parable, entrapping the reader in a labyrinth of double vision, challenged to apprehend the reflection of what cannot be seen according to the limit of the author’s imagination, that is, the interior of the law (*Gesetz*), the inside, the side-within, the core that is invisibly seen.²⁴¹ However, we learn something critical about Kafka’s understanding of law in the remark the priest makes about what is inscribed in the introductory text to the law, that is, law is envisioned primarily from a textual standpoint. The law is the inscribed voice of authority that demands seemingly endless interpretation and ongoing application.²⁴² In my judgment, *Gesetz* should be restored to its

description of his own work from his diary entry of 16 Jan. 1922, as ‘an assault upon the border’, which ‘might have developed quite easily into a new esoteric doctrine, a Kabbala’. Text cited in Wechsler, ‘El Lissitzky’s “Interchange Stations”’, 190. From this passage it is evident that Kafka perceived an essential connection between esotericism (particularly of a Jewish form) and the attack on boundaries. See Alter, *Necessary Angels*, 71–2; id., ‘Kafka as Kabbalist’. For fuller discussion of the impact of kabbalistic esotericism on Kafka, see Grözinger, *Kafka and Kabbalah*. For a brief but informed review of the scholarly discussion on this topic, see also Beitchman, *Alchemy of the Word*, 159–64.

²³⁷ The first edition was published in 1935 with the title *Die Geheimnisse der Schöpfung*.

²³⁸ See above n. 219.

²³⁹ Cited in Adorno, *Beethoven*, 245, n. 305.

²⁴⁰ Kafka, *Trial*, 213. In preparation of this chapter, I have also consulted the original German *Der Prozess*, and *Trial: A New Translation*.

²⁴¹ On Kafka’s mythopoetics, see Meletinsky, *Poetics of Myth*, 313–28.

²⁴² On this score, it is important to recall Kafka’s description in the first interrogation of the ‘small notebook’, the sole object lying on the table before the examining magistrate: ‘It was like an ancient school exercise book, grown dog-eared from thumbing’ (*Trial*, 40). The weight of the authority of the law is here also placed squarely within the parameters of a text. Robert Gibbs suggested to me in conversation that the setting wherein the first interrogation takes place

linguistic root in the Hebrew *torah*, which Kafka understood in a decidedly (meta)rabbinic manner as a treasured word—the pearl of wisdom—hid behind veils of what is not to be seen.²⁴³ Hence, the doorkeeper guards the door that leads to other doors behind which lies the text of the law. The path culminates in ascertaining that which must be explicated by every reader in every generation, a taking-hold by letting-go.²⁴⁴ Recognition of the unique status of each reader is attested in Kafka's portrayal of the doorkeeper's final words to the old man nearing the end: 'No one but you could gain admittance through this door, since this door was intended for you, I am now going to shut it.'²⁴⁵ The very entrance over which the doorkeeper kept guard and rejected the man's requests to pass through is now proclaimed by the doorkeeper as having been solely for this man. Since the man was approaching death, the door had to be shut. Kafka entices the reader to interpret the parable by the hermeneutical means illumined in the parable, to explicate the parable by and in its own light.²⁴⁶ By elucidating the legend in this manner, the possibility of reading it as a meta/text in dialogue with Paul's critique of Pharisaic nomianism and the burden of law is opened.²⁴⁷ Like Paul, Kafka walks the path of rabbinic hermeneutics to stretch beyond the limits of its semio-praxis.²⁴⁸ The way to the law is through the layers of interpretation that block

alludes to a synagogue. To me this is a credible insight that sheds much light on the underlying intent of the book as Kafka's struggle with the Torah-centric nature of Judaism. One should also bear in mind that the final discussion occurs in a cathedral.

²⁴³ See esp. the description of Torah as the king's daughter set within seven palaces discussed in Wolfson, *Circle*, 6. I do not mean to suggest Kafka was enamoured of the halakhic praxis of rabbinic Judaism. Particularly relevant regarding his vitriolic attitude towards the Torah is the description of his experience in synagogue offered in *Letter to His Father*, 77: 'And so I yawned and dozed through the many hours . . . and did my best to enjoy the few little bits of variety there were, as for instance when the Ark of the Covenant was opened, which always reminded me of the shooting galleries where a cupboard door would open in the same way whenever one hit a bull's eye; except that there something interesting always came out and here it was always just the same old dolls without heads.' In the continuation of this passage, Kafka speaks of his fear of being called to the Torah. I think it is plausible to say that Kafka was influenced by rabbinic hermeneutics even though he clearly rejected the ceremonial practices of orthodox Judaism.

²⁴⁴ See Kirchberger, *Franz Kafka's Use of Law*, 45. Consider Kafka's own aphorism in *Great Wall of China*, 83: 'There is a goal, but no way; what we call a way is hesitation.'

²⁴⁵ *Trial*, 214–15.

²⁴⁶ The hermeneutical doubling has been well noted by Goozè, 'Texts, Textuality, and Silence'.

²⁴⁷ For an analysis of the parable 'Before the Law' in light of Paul's attitude toward law, see Kreis, *Kafka's 'Proceß'*, 39–51. A Pauline reading seems to be implied as well in the interpretation of Kafka's parable offered by Buber, *Knowledge of Man*, 140–7. According to Buber, the key to enter into the interior of the law, which represents freedom from the law, is admission of one's guilt under the law.

²⁴⁸ By this term I intend ritually oriented behaviour whose meaning is encoded in a complex web of culturally mediated symbolic signs.

one's way to the law.²⁴⁹ Applying the rabbinic hermeneutic in a decidedly modernistic way, however, Kafka would insist that authority of the lawful text persists even though it cannot be ascertained. As Kafka put it in his diary entry of 11 February 1914, it may be necessary for one to obey even if one hears no command.²⁵⁰

Toward the end of the man's life, when his eyesight had dimmed, he perceived the 'radiance that streams inextinguishably from the door of the law'.²⁵¹ The original German conveys an ambivalence of meaning that we seek to carry over in translation. *Wohl aber erkennt er jetzt im Dunkel einen Glanz, der unverlöschlich aus der Türe des Gesetzes bricht.* In the darkness—perceived only in blindness—the brilliance of Torah becomes visible.²⁵² Kafka here directs us to a realm of discourse into which we, much like the man from the country, cannot enter if we are not already within. The persistent wish—in Kafka's own words, the insatiable (*unersättlich*) will—to enter is sign enough that there is a way in only if there is no way out. This is the lesson the priest set out to teach K. through the parable: the obsessive desire to get out from under the authority of law is equivalent to the intractable urge to enter the door through which one would access the law that cannot be accessed.²⁵³ The man is outside the law not because he wants to go in, as one critic expressed the matter,²⁵⁴ but precisely because he is already inside, that is, the inside is the vantage-point from which he imagines that he is outside.²⁵⁵ This paradox

²⁴⁹ See Steiner, *Real Presences*, 41: 'The *midrashic* method of reading is that of the argumentative, qualifying, revisionary gloss and marginalia on the holy text and on previous readings. . . . This reading without end represents the foremost guarantee of Jewish identity. . . . Most significantly, the greatest of modern Jewish writers and imaginers, Kafka, gives to his fictions the lineaments of exegesis, of probing, baffled marginalia to the abyss of meaning' (emphasis in original).

²⁵⁰ Kafka, *Diaries*, 257.

²⁵¹ *Trial*, 214.

²⁵² De Certeau, *Mystic Fable*, 3, suggests that the radiance that streams from behind the door of the Law is an 'allusion to the *Shekhinah* of God in the Jewish tradition'. I do not see a compelling reason to follow this line of interpretation.

²⁵³ It is of interest to recall here that in *Letter to His Father*, 29, Kafka compares himself to a slave who 'lived under laws that had been invented only for me and which I could . . . never completely comply with'. The image of Kafka not being able to adhere to laws that have been invented for him is reminiscent of the image in the parable of 'Before the Law' of the man from the country not being able to walk through the door that is meant especially for him.

²⁵⁴ Jaffe, *Process of Kafka's Trial*, 108.

²⁵⁵ The paradoxical logic and the destabilizing of the inside–outside dichotomy could also be profitably applied to *The Castle*, but that lies beyond the scope of this inquiry. Let me say briefly that, in spite of the significant differences between the two novels, *The Castle* shares an important similarity with the parable in *The Trial*: just as the man never gains permission to go through the gate of the law, so K. does not enter the castle. For an interesting attempt to read *The Castle* as a parable for the mystic quest to reach the seemingly unattainable God, perhaps reflecting the symbolic imagery of St Teresa of Avila, see Gray, 'The Castle', 55–6. On the marginal status of Kafka as someone genuinely on the outside, see Löwy, *Redemption and Utopia*, 71.

captures the acute sense of not-belonging expressive of the modernist sense of belonging central to Kafka's writing, a sentiment, gnostic to its core, poignantly captured in the last line of Scholem's poem *Paraphrase, aus der Prosa des 'Tagebuchs'*, penned on 12 May 1918 upon first reading Walter Benjamin's 'The Metaphysics of Youth', *In der Entfremdung werden wir befreit*, 'In this estrangement we shall be free'.²⁵⁶ The experience of alienation (*Einsamkeit*) is formulated more specifically in Kafka through the intricate web of text and commentary (reminiscent of the rabbinic hermeneutic) mediated through a sense of cultural identity with a linguistic community (*Sprachgemeinschaft*).²⁵⁷ The relentless quest to enter indicates that one has never exited; being outside is what it is to be inside.²⁵⁸ Denial of access to the law, therefore, is invitation to enter before the law, the hermeneutical act of re/covery, that is, re/turning to where one has continuously never been.²⁵⁹

Maurice Blanchot has argued that the ordeal of writing for Kafka, with its antithetical impulses of being inside and outside the world of social commerce, reflected in the need to fulfil the law and in the opposing tendency to abnegate it, takes place within the paternity of religious conflict (especially attested in Judaism) between the wager for salvation and the risk of damna-

²⁵⁶ Scholem, *Fullness of Time*, 52–3. Interestingly, Scholem begins the poem included in his copy of Kafka's *Der Prozess*, *ibid.* 100–1, with the words *Sind wir ganz von dir geschieden?*, 'Are we utterly estranged from you?' In the continuation of the poem, Scholem affirms that, in an age that has disavowed God, the 'sole ray of revelation' (*allein strahlt Offenbarung*) is experienced in the shape of negation. And, in an even more paradoxical manner, Scholem describes in another part of the poem (pp. 104–5), the 'melancholy knowledge' (*trauervolle Wissen*) that no ray of light that comes forth from the 'center of destruction' (*Zentrum der Vernichtung*) can illumine the direction that 'the Law commanded us to take', but it is only as a consequence of this darkness that an epiphany occurs and 'a veil has suddenly been torn, | Lord, before your majesty'. The revelation consists precisely of the fact that there is nothing that shows itself, no clarity of the path, a sense of judgement looming but no certainty regarding the judge.

²⁵⁷ On the dialectical tension between alienation from and a yearning to belong to the Jewish community in Kafka's spiritual and literary world, see Isenberg, *Between Redemption and Doom*, 19–50. See also Gilman, 'A Dream of Jewishness'.

²⁵⁸ Consider the remark of Blanchot, *Step Not Beyond*, 102: 'The more he encloses himself, the more he says that he belongs to the Outside.' If we apply this comment to the act of reading, we could say that the more the reader is enclosed inside the text, the more the reader is displaced outside the text.

²⁵⁹ The circularity of the narrative logic of paradox entails a reversal of time such that going forward is stepping back. It lies beyond the scope of this chapter to enter into a discussion that would do justice to the complexity and significance of this subject. On the inversion and suspension of time in Kafka, see the preliminary remarks of Jaffe, *Process*, 72–4. Here one would do well to recall Kafka's paradoxical account of the Jewish messianic hope in *Parables and Paradoxes*, 81: 'The Messiah will come only when he is no longer necessary; he will come only on the day after his arrival; he will come, not on the last day, but on the very last.' How can one come on the day after one has arrived unless in arriving one has already come before one has arrived? For discussion of this parable in light of Kafka's *theologia negativa* and *utopia negativa*, see Löwy, *Redemption and Utopia*, 77.

tion.²⁶⁰ If we are to speak of writing as affording one the ‘possibility of fulfilment’, it is as a ‘path without a goal perhaps comparable to that goal without a path which is the only one that must be reached’.²⁶¹ In the logic embraced by Kafka, opposites are identical in virtue of being different. Judged from the perspective of everyday consciousness—and here I have in mind both the epistemic and ethical domains—this logic might sound perverse, the reasoning insane. But, as Kafka tells us elsewhere, the task is not merely to read the parable, but to follow it so that one becomes it, for by becoming the parable, one rids oneself of the concern with mundane affairs, a concern that resists the paradoxical affirmation of truth as untruth in the effort to comprehend the incomprehensible.²⁶² The one who knows what cannot be known is perforce subject to deception (*Täuschung*), for to know the unknown requires that one knows what one does not know, but one can know what one does not know only if one does not know what one knows. To proclaim knowledge in such a state is to delude oneself with respect to what one does not know about what one knows and does know about what one does not know. In knowing the unknowable, knowledge cannot be but deceptive, duplicitous, deluding. ‘Truth is indivisible,’ wrote Kafka in one of his philosophical aphorisms, ‘hence it cannot recognize itself; whoever wants to recognize it must be a lie’.²⁶³ Reversing the ancient maxim of Empedocles that wisdom consists of like knowing like,²⁶⁴ Kafka embraced the notion that like knows unlike, for to know truth one must be a lie. Indeed, in the nightmare of Kafka’s reason,²⁶⁵ the distinction between truth and untruth is called into question. Mimicking the fate of the man from the country, who in turn mimics the fate of K., the reader can see the light only from within

²⁶⁰ Blanchot, ‘The Diaries.’

²⁶¹ *Ibid.* 198. For further elucidation of this aspect of Kafka’s worldview, see Corngold, ‘Nietzsche.’

²⁶² Kafka, *Complete Stories*, 457. In this connection, it is of interest to consider the following excerpt, dated 6 Aug. 1914, from Kafka, *Diaries*, 302, also printed in *Trial*, 275: ‘What will be my fate as a writer is very simple. My talent for portraying my dreamlike inner life has thrust all other matters into the background; my life has dwindled dreadfully, nor will it cease to dwindle. Nothing else will ever satisfy me.’ For Kafka, there was no easy resolution between the existential demands of being a writer and the complexities of interpersonal relationships. In the final analysis, Kafka’s thought, as his very being, is bound to a poetical sensibility that resists distinguishing sharply between fact and fiction, experience and imagination. For two detailed studies of the poetic dimension of Kafka, see Eschweiler, *Kafkas Dichtung*, and Fromm, *Artistisches Schreiben*.

²⁶³ Kafka, *Great Wall*, 92. See Sokel, ‘Programme of K.’s Court’, 5.

²⁶⁴ *Presocratic Philosophers*, 344 (according to the report of Theophrastus): ‘Wisdom is of like by like, ignorance unlike by unlike, wisdom being either identical with or closely akin to perception.’

²⁶⁵ I have borrowed this expression from Pawel, *Nightmare of Reason*.

darkness, not the luminous darkness of mystic vision, the cloud of unknowing, the nothing that is everything, but the darkened illumination of our tainted vision, the chain of ambiguity by which we determine truth, the everything that is nothing.²⁶⁶ In Kafka's world, the principle of rational argumentation, the backbone of human commerce and the discourse of exchange, suffers (dis)integration in the face of the recognition that the only thing utterly necessary is utter contingency. The ultimate truth of which one becomes aware is the logical necessity that 'consummate untruth is the contradiction of itself'.²⁶⁷ The law's brilliance relates to the obscurity that is beheld most vividly in apprehending the nihilistic implications of the paradox of the hermeneutical circle: if the truth is that there is no truth that is not a matter of interpretation, then even this truth is subject to interpretation, and thus it is true only if it is false and false only if it is true.²⁶⁸ In the dimming of vision, closing the eye to the polarities that structure the boundaries of the lifeworld, there is insight, sighting within, seeing the radiance of law glistening from behind the open gate as it is being shut.

The statement that Kafka locates in the preface to the law, 'before the Law stands a doorkeeper', is metaphorically the door through which the reader must pass in the effort to understand the text. Most critically, one must consider how this proclamation relates to the delusion to which K. is susceptible according to the assessment of the priest with regard to his trusting and not trusting the court. What precisely is the delusion? As it happens, Kafka himself attempts to answer the question, and offers two possible interpretations that are embedded in the text as commentary on the parable in a style that is indebted to the Jewish exegetical tradition.²⁶⁹ Immediately after the conclusion of the parable, K. utters 'So the doorkeeper deceived the man'.²⁷⁰ According to this view, the doorkeeper is guilty of deception, for he withheld the critical information from the man that the door was intended only for

²⁶⁶ On the central role of ambivalence in the parable of the doorkeeper and the consequent possibility of an unlimited variety of readings, see Sussman, *The Trial*, 135–50.

²⁶⁷ Adorno, *Prisms*, 257.

²⁶⁸ A discussion of hermeneutics from this vantage-point can be found in Vattimo, *Beyond Interpretation*.

²⁶⁹ The blurring between text and commentary is attested in Kafka's remark regarding psychoanalysis in a letter to Franz Werfel, cited in Handelman, *Slayers*, 175: 'The Jews have always produced their joys and sorrows at almost the same time as the Rashi commentary relating to them, and here again they have done so.' Kafka perceptively contextualizes the evolution of modern psychoanalysis in the history of Jewish textual interpretation. Surely, this is true of his own prose, which at critical moments follows the way of the rabbinic hermeneutic, to include in the text commentary on the text, thereby destabilizing the distinction between centre and margin, marginalizing the centre by centring the margin.

²⁷⁰ *Trial*, 215.

him and thus no one else could gain admittance through it. When the priest imparted this information to the old man, it was too late. The secret that would have enabled him to enter the door was given the moment the door was closed. By contrast, the priest offers the view that the doorkeeper is in a state of delusion since he apparently knew nothing of the interior of the law. The doorkeeper is simple-minded, 'he does not know the law from inside, he knows only the way that leads to it, where he patrols up and down'.²⁷¹ K. acknowledges that the priest has put up a good argument, but, in the end, he insists on the validity of his own approach, although he is willing to accept both as credible explanations that need to be affirmed concurrently. More importantly, even if we were to accept the view that the doorkeeper is deceived in the rather peculiar sense of being ignorant of the inner sense of the law, his deception had an adverse impact on the man who steadfastly sought to walk through the entrance guarded by the doorkeeper. The priest expresses his own reservations about this interpretation, insisting that he is a servant of the law and thus is beyond human judgement. Since it is the law that places him in his post, to question his dignity is to question the dignity of the law. When K. responds that he does not accept this argument, for it would presume that everything the doorkeeper said is true, a possibility that the priest's own statements refute, Kafka delivers the remark that most incisively expresses his scepticism: "No," said the priest, "it is not necessary to accept everything as true, one must only accept it as necessary." "A melancholy conclusion," said K. "It turns lying into a universal principle."²⁷² The truth is that there is no truth. What we consider to be true is not necessarily truthful but truthfully necessary, a judgement that is relative to the particular rules of engagement in the intersubjective sphere: this is truth solely by not being truth and thus there is no truth only if there is truth. In the parabolic reality envisioned by Kafka, everything is as it seems to be, for nothing seems to be what it is. The reader who has followed the swerve of Kafka's logic now walks the thin line between fact and fiction, breaching the wall that divides faith and heresy. Kafka would have surely agreed with Wittgenstein's musing: 'Religion as madness is a madness springing from irreligiousness'.²⁷³

Reflecting on Kafka's parable, which she tropes as 'How to Go before One's Door',²⁷⁴ Hélène Cixous writes: 'The text is situated in a space where the

²⁷¹ *Trial*, 217.

²⁷² *Ibid.* 220.

²⁷³ Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 13. Consider also the remarks of Derrida, *Monolingualism*, 10: 'I have always suspected the law, as well as language, of being mad, of being, at any rate, the unique place and the first condition of madness.'

²⁷⁴ Cixous, *Readings*, 14.

distinction between reason and madness is impossible. We are in a paradox, where when we think one thing, the thing itself thinks the opposite of what we think that it thinks'.²⁷⁵ We are before the law, but to be before the law, we must be outside the law. There is no before the law unless there is outside the law, but how can one outside the law be before the law? Cixous correctly notes that the law comes first, even before the text as the text begins 'Before the law'.

There is already an implicit paradox in the fact that the text begins with 'Before the law'. The text says it, and imposes on the reader a law that consists in making it impossible to put into question the existence of the law. . . . We are not supposed to ask him what the law is. The law is treated like a place one thinks one is going to enter. From the beginning, we are prohibited from going in, and from asking ourselves what it means to enter the law.²⁷⁶

The desire on the part of the man from the country who comes before the doorkeeper to enter the law belongs to the law, for what can be more lawful than the wish to gain admittance to the law? However, in the (il)logic of the parable, to enter the door of law is prohibited and thus the desire to do so is transgressive. 'The man from the country is in this strange situation where from the moment he wants to enter in the law, he is not there. In order *not* to transgress the law, he has to remain in the immobile situation before the law'. The darkness of Kafka's vision dazzles the mind in its befuddling light refracted as it is in the prism of paradox. To close the door of the law, to bring closure to the law, would be to remove the means by which one trespasses the law, but entry through the door of law would necessitate discarding the law.²⁷⁷ To be before the law, one must stand outside the law, for the door of the law is open as long as there is no access to the law. To get beyond the law, however, one must go through the law, for the point of departure is the point of entry, the way out the way in.²⁷⁸ No one heeds the law like the outlaw.

A similar insight into Kafka's enigmatic vision led Derrida to the conclusion that law deals with limit, the wholly other that suffers the fate of disappearance in the non-phenomenality of that which cannot be represented, the mark that marks the trespass of the re/mark.²⁷⁹ Law, thereby, produces the unrepresentable as the limit that belongs to the representable by

²⁷⁵ Ibid.

²⁷⁶ Ibid. 15.

²⁷⁷ My brief discussion of Kafka has benefited from the analysis in Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 49–58.

²⁷⁸ It is of interest here to recall the description of the soul's 'mystical walk' as 'an exit only to return' offered by the seventeenth-century alchemist Thomas Vaughan, *Magical Writings*, 5.

²⁷⁹ Derrida, 'Sending', 134–7.

prohibiting representation. As a consequence, the law puts things in place by trespassing the limit it sets. Alternatively expressed, the law is conditioned by the unrepresentable that renders all representation transgressive, but without representation there would be no law. Transgression, therefore, lies entangled in the web of law and law in the web of transgression.²⁸⁰ In Derrida's own words: 'But perhaps the law itself manages to do more than transgress the figure of all possible representation, which is difficult to conceive, as it is difficult to conceive anything at all beyond representation, but commits us perhaps to thinking altogether differently'.²⁸¹ In another study, which is dedicated exclusively to an elucidation of Kafka's parable, Derrida expresses this idea in slightly different terminology: 'Relation to the law is singular—there is a law of singularity which must enter a relation without ever coming into contact with the general or universal essence of law. However, the singular text in this case names or relates in its way this conflict of non-encounter between law and singularity, this paradox or enigma of being-before-the-law'.²⁸² The text of the law belongs exclusively to the man who is condemned by the force of circumstances to stand before the door behind which the text is stored away. Only by dispossession can the law be possessed by the individual to whom it singularly belongs.

In another lecture Derrida focuses on the law of hospitality, which he links exegetically to the myth of Oedipus, to articulate the paradoxical notion of a law that is 'illegal, transgressive, outside the law, like a lawless law, *nomos anomos*, law above the laws and law outside the law'.²⁸³ The 'step of hospitality' is thus impossible without the possibility of 'no hospitality'—the French *pas d'hospitalité* conveys both meanings. Every step is digressive and transgressive, a 'step to one side' that is a 'step too many'. The process of hospitality is unimaginable without imagining an interminable and uncrossable threshold, the thought of the (un)thought.

It is as though hospitality were the impossible: as though the law of hospitality defined this very impossibility, as if it were only possible to transgress it, as though *the* law of absolute, unconditional, hyperbolic hospitality, as though the categorical imperative

²⁸⁰ See Derrida and Ferraris, *Taste for the Secret*, 43. In the context of discussing his disapproval of grammatical mistakes in spite of his taking liberties with language, Derrida makes the following general statement: 'A transgression should always know what it transgresses, which always makes the transgression impure, and compromised in advance with what it transgresses.'

²⁸¹ Derrida, 'Sending', 137. On the interpretation of Derrida's deconstructionism as seeking to perpetuate the law through its own transgressions, see Handelman, *Slayers*, 166.

²⁸² Derrida, 'Devant La Loi', 131. See Hobson, *Jacques Derrida*, 142–5; Duncan, *Pre-Text of Ethics*, 19–20.

²⁸³ Derrida and Dufourmantelle, *Of Hospitality*, 79.

of hospitality commanded that we transgress all the laws (in the plural) of hospitality, namely, the conditions, the norms, the rights and thus duties that are imposed on hosts and hostesses, on the men or women who give a welcome as well as the men or women who receive it.²⁸⁴

The particular law of hospitality instructs us in a more general way that the law of limit cannot be fulfilled unless the limit of law be transgressed. This I take to be the implicit message of the parable of standing before the law.

Here one would do well to recall that Scholem remarked that Kafka's world is appropriately designated 'theological', even though it is a world in which God does not appear.²⁸⁵ On the contrary, it is precisely the absence of God from the world that marks his presence in the world, a conundrum that Scholem relates to his understanding of the kabbalistic notion of divine revelation as the unmediated word. As he puts the matter in a letter to Benjamin dated 17 July 1934:

Kafka's world is the world of revelation, but of revelation seen of course from that perspective in which it is returned to its own nothingness. . . . The *nonfulfillability* of what has been revealed is the point where a *correctly* understood theology (as I, immersed in my Kabbalah, think. . .) coincides most perfectly with that which offers the key to Kafka's work. Its problem is not, dear Walter, its *absence* in a preanimistic world, but the fact that it cannot be *fulfilled*.²⁸⁶

To pass through the door of the law is to get beyond the law; one does not, however, pass to a state of lawless anarchy, but to a state of anarchic lawfulness, the anarchy that licitly grounds the very possibility of there being any law, the seemingly senseless nature of revelation that makes interpretation logically possible and hermeneutically necessary, that is, grasping the meaninglessness of revelation brings into sharp relief the inability to separate revelation and interpretation in the lived world of scriptural religion.²⁸⁷ Interestingly, in an unpublished manuscript from 1926 Scholem remarked that Kafka's parable of the guardian of the law is 'like a kind of summary of Jewish theology, which in its unique dialectic is not destructive but, on the contrary, radiates a powerful inner melancholy. Here the true talmudic thinking breaks its light into a rainbow of colors'.²⁸⁸ The relatively young

²⁸⁴ Ibid. 75–7.

²⁸⁵ See the letter of Scholem to Benjamin dated 9 July 1934 in the *Correspondence*, 122–3.

²⁸⁶ Ibid. 126, and analysis in Alter, *Necessary Angels*, 109–10. On the correspondence between Scholem and Benjamin on Kafka, see Handelman, *Fragments*, 47–55; Alter, *Necessary Angels*, 3–23.

²⁸⁷ See Kaufmann, 'Imageless Refuge', 155–6.

²⁸⁸ Scholem, *Possibility of Jewish Mysticism*, 193. Here it is also of interest to recall the characterization of Kafka's writing offered by Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 122: 'Kafka's parables, however, unfold in the first sense, the way a bud turns into a blossom. That is why their effect

Scholem proposed that the absence of God in Kafka's parable reflected something essential to rabbinic theology, for precisely the negation of presence allows for the affirmation of the foundation of law in the 'anarchic suspension'²⁸⁹ of law. At a later date, in a letter to Salman Schocken written on 29 October 1937, recounting his 'true intentions in studying kabbalah', Scholem remarked that the years of 'stimulating thought' had brought him to a 'rationalistic skepticism... coupled with an intuitive affirmation of those mystical theses that lie on the narrow boundary between religion and nihilism', a fine line that was most fully and incomparably expressed in the writings of Kafka, which are 'a secularized description for a contemporary person of the feeling of a Kabbalistic world'.²⁹⁰ Echoing this sentiment in the last of the ten unhistorical aphorisms on kabbalah, Scholem described Kafka's obsession with a ubiquitous but inaccessible law as a form of 'heretical Kabbalah' that places one on the 'borderline between religion and nihilism'.²⁹¹ For Scholem, Kafka embodied the hermeneutical spirit of kabbalah as it pertained particularly to the convergence of opposites, for the texts he composed reside in the interstices between faith and doubt, reason and absurdity, a textual space that calls for ceaseless interpretation of the word that cannot be rendered meaningful since it transcends the limits of language.²⁹² Kabbalists likewise perceived that this hypernomian element, the

resembles poetry. This does not mean that his prose pieces belong entirely in the tradition of Western prose forms; they have, rather, a similar relationship to doctrine as the Haggadah does to the Halakah.' In a manner similar to Scholem, Benjamin utilizes the tropes of talmudic thinking to depict the literary style of Kafka. See also Benjamin's comments on Kafka in a letter to Scholem dated 12 June 1938, translated in *Illuminations*, 143–4: 'Kafka's real genius was that he tried something entirely new; he sacrificed truth for the sake of clinging to its transmissibility, its haggadic element. Kafka's writings are by their nature parables. But it is their misery and their beauty that they had to become *more* than parables. They do not modestly lie at the feet of the doctrine, as the Haggadah lies at the feet of the Halakah.' For alternative translations, see *Correspondence*, 225, and Benjamin, *Correspondence of Walter Benjamin 1910–1940*, 565. On Kafka's use of the Talmud as an archetype, see Steiner, *After Babel*, 69.

²⁸⁹ See above, n. 167.

²⁹⁰ Scholem, *Possibility of Jewish Mysticism*, 3–4. An earlier English translation of the letter is found in Biale, *Kabbalah and Counter-History*, 74–6, and the original German appeared, *ibid.* 215–16. A Hebrew translation was published in *Ha-Aretz*, Erev Pesah 1981, and reprinted in Scholem, *Explications*, 29–31.

²⁹¹ Scholem, *Judaica III*, 271. For translation and analysis, see Biale, 'Gershom Scholem's Ten Unhistorical Aphorisms', 120–3. See also Alter, *Necessary Angels*, 90–1; Löwy, *Redemption and Utopia*, 81–2.

²⁹² The point was made explicitly by Scholem in a lecture he delivered in 1974, 'My Way to Kabbalah', on the occasion of his being awarded the Literary Prize of the Bavarian Academy of Arts. See *Possibility of Jewish Mysticism*, 23 (Hebrew translation in *Explications*, 304). Scholem recalls that when he first emigrated to Palestine there were three texts that occupied his attention, the Hebrew Bible, *Sefer ha-Zohar*, and the collected works of Kafka. For the young Scholem, these collections were imbued with the 'spirit of Judaism'. Sensing the seeming

lawful venturing beyond the law, is a central aspect of the attitude towards ritual in Jewish tradition most fully embodied in the messianic ideal.²⁹³

As it happens, Kafka is not the only thinker who has grasped that in Judaism fulfilment of the law is dependent on its being transcended. The philosopher Emmanuel Levinas has formulated the matter in terms that are particularly germane to my analysis, for his understanding of the law pointing to what lies beyond itself does not embrace the nihilism of Kafka's vision: 'Whatever our mistrust towards the letter and our thirst for the Spirit may be, monotheistic humanity is a humanity of the Book. Scriptural tradition provides the trace of a beyond of this very tradition'.²⁹⁴ The beyond to which Levinas refers is the transcendence of God, the wholly other that is the mark of holiness, that which is utterly separate, the otherwise-than-being signified by the ineffable name, YHWH, which, according to rabbinic tradition, is routinely pronounced Adonai. In this matter, Levinas embraces an idea that is essential to traditional kabbalism: the most sacred of God's names, YHWH, is simultaneously hidden and revealed, indeed hidden in its revelation and revealed in its hiddenness. The philosophical implication of the liturgical custom that the Tetragrammaton is never uttered as it is written is that language (of which the name is representative) is always paired with the silence that transcends it.²⁹⁵ 'Whatever comes in the context of meaning must also always be anchoretic or holy; the voice which resounds in speech must also be the voice which softens or falls silent'.²⁹⁶ The ineffability of YHWH points to that which exceeds language, the enigma of transcendence, the trace of that which is beyond the tradition and its ideal foundation. Absolute holiness is demarcated in the book by the name that cannot be erased, for it betokens the erasure of that which cannot be spoken.

peculiarity of including Kafka in this list, Scholem explained that 'Kafka's writings, with their distinctive characteristics, connect in a peculiar way to the other two works mentioned. In extensive portions of his work there is also a kind of canonicity: that is to say, they are subject to infinite interpretation; and many of them, specifically the more impressive among them, in themselves constitute works of interpretation.' The narrowing of the gap between text and interpretation, that is, viewing interpretation as constitutive of the text, is an essential feature of kabbalistic hermeneutics, as I have noted in many of my studies. See e.g. Wolfson, 'Beautiful Maiden'.

²⁹³ My reading is in accord with the attempt to interpret Kafka's parable as an allegory for the nullification of the law—'its being a force without significance'—in the messianic age proffered by Agamben, *Potentialities*, 172–4.

²⁹⁴ *Beyond the Verse*, 120,

²⁹⁵ One could make a credible argument that on this point there is agreement between kabbalists and the idea expressed by Maimonides regarding silence and the contemplative ideal of prayer or what he calls 'intellectual worship'. See *Guide*, I, 59, pp. 139–40; Fox, *Interpreting Maimonides*, 309–10; Benor, *Worship of the Heart*, 7, 75, 125.

²⁹⁶ Levinas, *Beyond the Verse*, 122.

TRANSMORAL PIETISM BEYOND GOOD AND EVIL

My contention, moreover, is that the extreme pietism expressed in kabbalistic literature, which I have identified as hypernomian, is best characterized as transmoral as opposed to immoral, for the path the kabbalist walks carries him beyond the normative categories of good and evil rather than abrogating them. As I noted above, there are various levels of mystical experience that reflect different stages in the dynamic unfolding of the divine nature. At one stage the dichotomy is appropriate, for the divine itself is dichotomized into polar opposites, but at another stage the mystic experiences and is integrated into the unity of the Godhead that transcends the division into right and left, holy and impure. But what does that tell us about the ethical nature of the mystical experience? Is there still the distinction between good and evil for the mystic who has experienced the unity of the divine, or are antinomies transmuted into one another such that the good is evil and the evil good?²⁹⁷ If the latter, should we adopt the language of Scholem and speak of 'redemption through sin',²⁹⁸ or are we better off speaking of deliverance from the duality of redemption and sin? Here, too, the limit is tested, and language itself mimics its very utterance by proving opposites to be true.

Hypernomianism and transmortality are two expressions of the same phenomenon. Ritual and moral imperatives are binding on the Jewish mystic, but the mystical experience is transformative. The surpassing of ritualism and moralism is expressive of the soteriological aspect of mystical experience cultivated by kabbalistic theosophy, an experience, that is, which overextends its limits, the limit-experience unlimited. Some kabbalists have proleptically anticipated the eschatological moment in which the dualities of the world are supposedly overcome so that permissible and forbidden, good and evil, are not easily distinguishable. The particular path of the Jewish mystical experience leads out of the specificity of this one tradition, but it does so in a manner that compels walking the path repeatedly to find the way out. If one contemplates the possibility of following the path to get beyond the path definitively, then one is off the path and thus will never get beyond the path. To

²⁹⁷ In this connection, it is of interest to consider the following remark of Abu Sa'id in Ibn al-Munavvar, *Secrets*, 375: 'His friend came to him to bind up his belly. When he lifted the darvish's robe, the darvish recited: "I shall remove my train by myself today. Now night is day and day is night for me." And the darvish said: "Here no sinfulness at all remains!"' (emphasis in original).

²⁹⁸ This is the title of the well-known essay by Scholem on the Sabbatian phenomenon included in the *Messianic Idea*, 78–41. For discussion of the intellectual background that may have fostered Scholem's orientation, see Wasserstrom, 'Defeating Evil', reprinted in id., *Religion After Religion*, 215–24.

traverse the path of law one must travel the path lawfully. In my estimation, this is a distinctive feature of the mystical phenomenon in the history of religions.

The dialectical surmounting of the nomian and ethical parameters is fully realized in kabbalistic eschatology. More recent scholarly work has shown that Scholem's assertion that only in the sixteenth-century Lurianic kabbalah, which took shape in Safed after the expulsion of the Jews from the Iberian peninsula at the end of the fifteenth century, are the mystical and messianic welded together must be qualified. Several scholars have put forth the argument that the merging of messianism and mysticism is characteristic of the kabbalistic orientation from a much earlier period; indeed, according to some, the view that the eschatological end is a return to the cosmological beginning should be attributed to the very dawning of the literary evolution of the kabbalah in medieval Provence and northern Spain.²⁹⁹ I am inclined myself to accept this view. The outcome of that debate is obviously quite relevant for the present discussion, for if the bypassing of the limit, whether ritualistic or ethical, is linked to the eschatological factor, the degree to which we succeed in ascertaining whether or not the latter is intrinsic to understanding kabbalistic ontology and axiology will help us decide on the status occupied by the hypernomian tendency in the religious philosophy proffered by kabbalists.³⁰⁰

Until the messianic era, which is marked by the elimination of the evil force and the consequent reintegration of the demonic in the divine, there is a definite boundary separating good and evil. As noted above, many of the traditional rituals are understood in terms of this dichotomy. Indeed, the very idea of holiness, the attainment of which is the final goal of pious life, is based on the notion of keeping the divine and demonic distinct. The blurring of the distinction between the two realms would constitute a form of overstepping one's boundary, *hassagat gevul*, following the language of Deuteronomy 27: 17. By contrast, in the time of messianic rectification there is an expansion of boundary, *harḥavat gevul*, which entails the overpowering of judgement by mercy and the consequent restoration of the former to the latter. A succinct formulation of this idea is given by the eighteenth-century Italian kabbalist Moses Ḥayyim Luzzatto:

²⁹⁹ Pedaya, "Flaw" and "Correction"; id., *Name and Sanctuary*; Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, 1–84.

³⁰⁰ Agamben, *Potentialities*, 162–3, depicts the messianic ideal as the 'limit concept' that 'signifies a crisis and radical transformation of the entire order of the law'. In virtue of this confrontation with the law, messianism 'represents the point of greatest proximity between religion and philosophy'. The author cites and is very much indebted to Scholem's account of the antinomian presentation of Torah in kabbalistic eschatology.

The boundary derives from the power of strength, but when peace is greatly strengthened, mercy overpowers strength, and then all the lights draw close to one another in a great affinity, for the power of closeness and unity grows strong in the lights. . . . Every power draws close to its neighbour and there is no great need for boundary. . . . The power of peace, which is strengthened, unifies everything in a complete unity.³⁰¹

In the state of exile, the demonic shell causes the separation of male and female and thereby prevents the unification and perfection of existence. The rupture of the dyadic unity is both the cause and effect of the severance of good and evil into distinct and competing potencies. In the messianic *tiqqun*, evil as an autonomous force will be annihilated and the good that is within evil, the spark of light trapped in the shell, will be restored to the realm of holiness.³⁰² The reparation is thus marked by a coincidence of opposites within the Infinite. In Luzzatto's words,

The Cause of Causes (*illat ha-illot*) reveals his unity and connects all the providential acts (*ha-hanhagah*) in one manner in the secret of the restoration of evil to good (*ḥazarat ha-ra le-ṭov*). It follows that this is the order (*seder*), the Cause of Causes maintains his unity over all the orders and unifies them in the secret of unity (*sod ha-yihud*) . . . for there is no distinction (*ḥilluq*) there between mercy and judgement, but everything is good in one equilibrium (*ha-kol ṭov be-hashwwa'ah aḥat*).³⁰³

Just as we spoke above of the plausibility of kabbalists envisioning the highest aspect of divinity as a world that is entirely masculine since it comprises the feminine other within itself, so too we can depict this gradation as absolute goodness since good contains evil within itself as the other that is same by being other. The technical expression *hashwwa'ah*, which I have rendered 'equilibrium,' conveys the idea of balance and symmetry,³⁰⁴ the identification of opposites, which yields an erasure of otherness while still maintaining difference.

The change in the ontic condition will have an impact, no doubt, on the ethical deportment in the world. That is, if the state of being—what Luzzatto intends by the word *seder*—entails that evil is no longer separate from good, the tenor and tone of human behaviour would have to shift accordingly. In its

³⁰¹ Luzzatto, *Ma'amar ha-Ge'ullah*, 83–4.

³⁰² The explanation for the existence of evil as an autonomous force that must be abrogated to illustrate that in the ultimate metaphysical sense evil itself is part of the good is repeated on many occasions in Luzzatto's oeuvre. See e.g. Luzzatto, *Qelaḥ Pitḥei Hōkhmah*, 171–2. For fuller discussion of the theme of the eschatological transformation of evil into good in the writings of Luzzatto, see Wolfson, 'Tiqqun ha-Shekhinah', 303–13, and reference to other scholarly treatments given on p. 303, n. 55.

³⁰³ *Qelaḥ Pitḥei Hōkhmah*, 109–10.

³⁰⁴ Luzzatto also uses the term *haskkamah*, 'agreement', to denote the coincidence of opposites. See e.g. *ibid.* 241.

most extreme form, the framework of rabbinic ritualism, based on priestly codes of holiness and impurity, with the rigid distinction between permissible and forbidden, is problematized philosophically by the presumed coincidence of opposites. Luzzatto expresses this idea in a most daring way, borrowing the formulation of the sixteenth-century kabbalist Abraham Galante,³⁰⁵ which in turn develops the locution of a passage found in several collections of rabbinic midrashim and earlier medieval sources,³⁰⁶ as discussed above:

Had the holiness not been there [in the demonic shell] it could not have existed even for a moment, as the verse says, 'You keep them all alive' (Neh. 9: 6), even the pig and the insect. Why is [the pig] called *hazir*? Because in the future it shall revert (*lahazor*) [to holiness] and it shall be permissible for the aspect of the shell and the desire, and even the archon of Esau, who is the angel of death and the evil inclination, shall be abolished, and death shall be destroyed forever, and the holiness shall be purified from the shell, 'in that day there shall be one Lord [with one name]' (Zech. 14: 9).³⁰⁷

The full disclosure of divine unity is predicated on the subjugation and transmutation of the impure into the holy. The apparent dualism of the current unredeemed state thus gives way to the monism of the redeemed world. 'When we ascend more to the root of things,' Luzzatto writes in another context, 'we comprehend how the essence of all is the unity of Ein Sof, blessed be he . . . And the essence of the unity is that even evil itself is evil only in its beginning, for in the end everything will be transformed into good'.³⁰⁸ In the state of redemption, therefore, all things are reintegrated in the Infinite such that there is no more distinction between good and evil, the permissible and the prohibited. Indeed, even the pig, which perhaps best emblemizes the restrictiveness of legalistic Judaism in its classical sources, is no longer forbidden because, as its very name suggests, in the messianic future it shall be restored to holiness.

In light of the collapse of duality in the face of ultimate oneness, the obvious question must again be raised: what is the role of morality in the ideal mystical state? Is it proper or even meaningful to speak of an ethics beyond good and evil, a transmoral morality? Some kabbalists were certainly aware of the potential subversion of tradition that emerges from within the tradition itself. One of the oft-cited examples of this phenomenon is the

³⁰⁵ Galante, *Qol Bokhim*, 95a.

³⁰⁶ See above, nn. 184–91.

³⁰⁷ Luzzatto, *Hoqer u-Mequbbal*, 22a. The transformation of the pig from an unholy to a pure animal is alluded to in id., *Tefillot le-Ramhal*, § 176, p. 153.

³⁰⁸ *Iggerot Pithēi Hokhmah wa-Da'at*, § 19, in *Sha'arei Ramhal*, 376. Cf. *ibid.*, § 54, p. 404: 'The Emanator, blessed be his name, desires to reveal his unity . . . and every curse will be transformed into blessing and all evil will change into good.' Cf. *Tefillot le-Ramhal*, § 253, p. 233.

position regarding the nature of the law adopted by the anonymous author of the later strata of zoharic literature, *Ra'aya Meheimna* and *Tiqqunei Zohar*. According to one of the more striking formulations penned by this author, the Torah of Emanation, which derives from the Tree of Life, is distinguished from the Torah of Creation, which derives from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.³⁰⁹ As the terminology suggests, only the Torah of Creation, which has sovereignty in this historical cycle, is characterized by the duality of good and evil, a condition that came about as a result of the sinful act of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. 'The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil is like the phallus (*berit*), the sign of the covenant (*ot berit*) from within is good but the foreskin is bad, the one from inside and the other from outside. Since the sin of the Tree of Knowledge causes a separation between *Ṣaddiq* and *Shekhinah*, the earth was smitten nine times and those who sin against *Shekhinah*, which is the tenth, are struck ten times'.³¹⁰ God did not permit Adam and Eve to eat of this tree's fruit because 'it is a mixture of good and evil, the tree of deception (*ilana de-shiqra*), one thing in the heart and another thing in the mouth, his heart is full of deception and he deceives by his mouth with words of truth'.³¹¹ The sinister force that deceived Eve and tempted Adam is the primordial serpent who is intimately entwined around the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, the tree of deception, a decidedly demonic depiction. The serpentine tree is the source of the religious law that governs and portends the way of the world in this historical epoch.³¹²

The nomian tradition in rabbinic Judaism, based heavily on the priestly-cultic distinction between permissible and prohibited, reflects the ontically dichotomous state of this tree. An astonishingly bold formulation of this critique is found in a section of *Ra'aya Meheimna*, a homily on the deuteronomistic injunction: 'If a man comes upon a virgin who is not engaged and he seizes her and lies with her, and they are discovered, the man who lay with her shall pay the girl's father fifty shekel of silver, and she be his wife. Because he has violated her, he can never have the right to divorce her' (Deut. 22: 28–9).³ The first of a number of interpretations offered in this text is predicated on decoding the 'virgin (*na'arah betulah*) who is not engaged' as a reference to Israel 'from the perspective of *Shekhinah* (*siṭra di-shekhintta*)',

³⁰⁹ Scholem, *Major Trends*, 211; id., *On the Kabbalah*, 66–70; Tishby, *Wisdom*, 1101–8; Giller, *Enlightened*, 59–63; Malka, *On the Paths*, 108–9.

³¹⁰ *Tiqqunei Zohar*, § 64, 95b.

³¹¹ *Ibid.*, § 59, 93a.

³¹² In the section from *Tiqqunim* printed in *Zohar* 1: 26a, the Tree of Knowledge is identified as the 'tree of the other side' and the 'mixed multitude'.

and the ‘man’ (*ish*) who comes upon her as the ‘rabbis and all masters of the academy (*rabbanan we-khol ma’rei metivta*)’, the aspect of Israel ‘from the perspective of the holy One, blessed be he (*siṭra de-qudsha berikh hu*)’. The rabbinic elite ‘seize’ Israel with the ‘knot of phylacteries (*qishshura di-tefillin*) and wings of commandment (*kanfei miṣwah*)’.³¹³ Critique of rabbinic ritual is here linked exegetically to the rape of an unbetrothed virgin, *na‘arah betulah*, emblematic of Israel when imagined from the perspective of *Shekhinah*, the rabbinic elite associated with the ‘man’, *ish*, responsible for the action, a designation of the segment of the Jewish community imagined from the vantage point of *Tif’eret*. Here we discern the proverbial house divided against itself, a polemical jab of one segment against another, which reflects, in a sense, a cleft in the androcentrism, a Jewish man (or men) criticizing the rabbinic establishment for seizing Israel and raping her, binding her with ritual, symbolically represented by the ‘knot of phylacteries’ (*qishshura di-tefillin*), and the ‘wings of commandment’ (*kanfei miṣwah*), which refers to the traditional fringe garment, *ṣiṣit*, a usage attested elsewhere in zoharic and related kabbalistic literature, the phylacteries correlated with holiness (*qedushshah*) and the fringes with commandment (*miṣwah*),³¹⁴ engendered respectively as masculine and feminine.³¹⁵ Be that as it may, the crucial point for this discussion is the application of the scriptural image of rape to describe the rabbis and their constricting the Jewish populace by halakhic rules and regulations.

In the continuation of the passage, however, the ‘faithful servant’, the imaginary Moses who is master of both exoteric and esoteric wisdom, rises to the partial defence of rabbinic ritual: the one engaged in the breadth of halakhah not for its own sake is considered to be like the woman held captive against her will, but there is the talmudic dictum that one should always be involved in Torah not for its own sake (*she-lo lishmah*) because one will thereby come to be involved in Torah for its own sake (*lishmah*). In kabbalistic parlance, the idiom *torah lishmah* denotes the theurgic task of unifying the name by conjoining the male and female aspects of the divine. The author of

³¹³ *Zohar* 3: 277a (*Ra‘aya Meheimna*).

³¹⁴ This correlation is based on an earlier rabbinic taxonomy according to which the fringe garment is included in the category of *tashmishhei miṣwah*, i.e. objects related to the performance of ritual commandments, whereas phylacteries are included in *tashmishhei qedushshah*, i.e. objects that are considered sacred and are instruments to inculcate holiness. See Babylonian Talmud, Megillah 26b. On the nexus between the fringe garment and *Shekhinah*, see also the dictum preserved in the name of Simeon ben Yoḥai in Babylonian Talmud, Menahot 43b.

³¹⁵ *Zohar* 1: 124b; 2: 43a (*Piqqudin*), 215b; *Book of the Pomegranate*, 58; ‘*Sefer ha-Mishkal*’, 100.

this text is alluding to a more positive value to be assigned to rabbinic ritual;³¹⁶ it can serve as a legitimate path to reach the mystical ideal of transcending the polarity presumed by law, which stems from the Tree of Knowledge: “This halakhah, which is from the aspect of the youth (*na’ar*), is good, for it separates from the Tree of Good and Evil, which is prohibition and permission, impurity and purity, ritually fit and unfit. On account of *na’ar* she is called *na’arah*, for in the future it is said of her “[So that it seizes the corners of earth] and shakes (*we-yinn’aru*) the wicked out of it” (Job 38: 13), that is, the prohibited, impure, and unfit, Samael and his servants.³¹⁷ In this passage a positive value is accorded halakhah, for it is the means by which good is separated from evil, the chaff winnowed from the straw. Interestingly, this aspect is said to derive from the youthful one, the *na’ar*, which I assume refers to *Yesod* in its angelic garb as *Meṭaṭron*; the title *na’arah*, which is derived from *na’ar*, is applied to *Shekhinah* on account of the fact that in the future she will shake (*yinna’er*) the wicked out of the earth. The implications of this passage are far-reaching. For the Torah to assume the role of being an antidote to the serpent, an idea expressed in classical rabbinic literature, it must partake of its poison, for the cure must be of the same nature as the malady. The serpent utters deceit in the mask of truth; in its deceit, the lie is true, truly deceitful, deceitfully true. Boundaries of law arise in response to transgression, but transgression is not possible without boundaries of law.

In the exilic state, *Shekhinah* is embodied in the form of the Oral Law (*torah she-be’al peh*), which offers protection to the Jews even as it keeps them constricted. Thus, according to the language of the twenty-first section of *Tiqunei Zohar*, the fiery word of God (Jer. 23: 29) is the Oral Law placed in the mouth of Israel, and the rock, *sela*, which is decoded as *al s[amekh]*, that is, ‘concerning the sixty’, is an allusion to the tractates of the Mishnah.³¹⁸ From this stone drops of water can be drawn forth (Num. 20: 8) to quench the thirst of Israel in exile. But what about the messianic future? What is the positive content of the Torah of the Tree of Life? In fact, posing the question in this way indicates the failure to grasp the phenomenon at hand. The Torah of the Tree of Life has no specific form, for it surpasses all duality and delimitation, which are related to the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. The

³¹⁶ Cf. the formulation in *Tiqunei Zohar*, § 70, 130*b*. The ritual obligations of wearing the fringe garment, putting on the phylacteries, and reciting the *Shema* are accorded the following respective theurgic functions: to establish a throne, to set a crown upon the divine, and to place the coronated glory upon the throne. Clearly, in this context, the author of *Tiqunei Zohar* followed the more standard approach adopted by kabbalists of this time, and thus he attributed a positive value to the rituals without qualification.

³¹⁷ *Zohar* 3: 277*a* (*Ra’aya Meheimna*).

³¹⁸ *Tiqunei Zohar*, § 21, 44*a*.

dichotomy between sacred and profane, which is the basis for the Torah in its present configuration, will no longer prevail in the eschatological age when the force of impurity will be totally removed from the world (based on Zech. 13: 2). In that state, there is no opposition between God and the other side, the holy One and Satan, thereby fulfilling the verse, 'The Lord alone will guide them, no alien god at his side' (Deut. 32: 12). The messianic Torah, which is identified more specifically as *Sefer ha-Zohar*, emanates from the splendour of the supernal Mother (*Binah*) and restores the ontological condition that prevailed in the Garden of Eden prior to the sin of Adam and Eve. It is in this sense that we must interpret the statement that Israel will depart from the exile by means of *Zohar*,³¹⁹ that is, the latter marks the attainment of a state of affairs when the demonic has been obliterated and thus the Torah of duality (rabbinic halakhah) is superseded by a Torah that reflects the spiritual consciousness of non-differentiated unity, which constitutes the liberty that shall be proclaimed throughout the land (Lev. 25: 10) in the messianic era. To be sure, the anonymous kabbalist behind the composition of these texts maintained that even in the messianic time there will be a distinction between the spiritual elite of Israel, the enlightened (*maskkilim*) who are called human beings (*adam*), and the ignorant (*am ha-areš*) or the mixed multitude (*erev rav*), who are compared to and designated as beasts (*behemot*). Interestingly enough, the distinction between human and beast generally applied to the relationship of Israel to the other nations is here applied to a division within the community of Israel, although even in this context those who are designated 'beasts' derive from the non-Israelite nations.³²⁰ A hierarchical element is preserved, therefore, even in the messianic era, which in the end mimics the social stratification operative in the Sinaitic theophany. In the language of the text itself:

In the future, Israel will taste of the Tree of Life, which is this book of *Zohar* by means of which they will go out from exile in mercy.³²¹ . . . The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, which entails what is forbidden and what is permissible, impurity and purity, no longer rules over Israel, for their sustenance is from the side of the Tree of Life wherein there is no conflict from the side of evil and argument from the side of impurity. . . . What is prohibited and what is permissible, impurity and purity, are not

³¹⁹ *Zohar* 3: 124b (*Ra'aya Meheimna*); *Tiqqunei Zohar*, § 6, 23b–24a; *Zohar Hadash*, 94a (*Tiqqunim*). In the last passage, the redemptive quality of *Zohar* is expressed as well in terms of the comparison of this treatise to the ark of Noah by which select human beings and animals were saved from the floodwaters. Regarding this image, see also *Zohar* 3: 153b (*Ra'aya Meheimna*).

³²⁰ *Zohar* 3: 125a (*Ra'aya Meheimna*). On the kabbalistic interpretation of the *erev rav* in the later strata of zoharic literature, see Ch. 1, n. 287.

³²¹ See *Tiqqunei Zohar*, Introduction, 6a.

removed from the ignorant, for from their perspective there is no difference between exile and the days of messiah except for the subjugation of the nations, for they do not taste of the Tree of Life and thus they need the code of law based on what is forbidden and what is permitted, impurity and purity. They are abhorrent in relation to the sages in the manner of the darkness before the light.³²²

Messianic consciousness involves the sense of illumination from the divine splendour, which is captured in the brilliance of the zoharic text—indeed, the nature of the light is linked in an intrinsic way to the secret based on the numerological equivalence of the words *raz*, mystery, and *or*, light³²³—that brings the enlightened onto the path beyond the path of law, and not simply onto the path that abrogates the law, which is itself nothing but a particular turn on the path of law. In an obvious polemic dig at the perspective articulated in the talmudic corpus,³²⁴ which was codified by Maimonides,³²⁵ the unenlightened here are described as maintaining that the only difference between the present exilic state and the messianic era is political in nature. The ignorant remain, therefore, in the condition of spiritual ignorance, which is the true nature of exile. By contrast, in the messianic state the enlightened are no longer subject to the domination of the tree of dualities. We are surely justified in taking the further step and arguing that for the enlightened in this historical epoch as well it is possible to experience messianic consciousness, which dutifully liberates the soul from the yoke of the commandments even in the ritualistic enactment of those very commandments. That is to say, release from the weight of obligation is not attained by discarding the laws, but rather by performing them with an intensity that pushes beyond their limit even as that very limit is established in the act of transgression. Indeed, a case can be made that the transgressive element not only establishes the law by setting its limit, but it represents the utopian joy of excess that is contained in the nomian restrictiveness.³²⁶ Here one is reminded of the insightful remark of

³²² *Zohar* 3: 124b–125a (*Ra'aya Meheimna*). See Tishby, *Wisdom*, 1108.

³²³ *Tiqqunei Zohar*, § 21, 53b: 'It says with respect to Israel, "Every boy that is born to you shall be thrown into the Nile" (Exod. 1: 22). Light (*or*) is the mystery (*raz*). The Nile is the partner of that light concerning which it says "but all the Israelites enjoyed light in their dwellings" (Exod. 10: 23). In this manner, in the final exile the *Zohar* contains the mystery, which is the light of the ultimate redemption, to fulfil [the verse] "I will show him wondrous deeds as in the days when you went forth out of the land of Egypt" (Micah 7: 15).' On the numerical equivalence of *raz* and *or*, with specific reference to the secrets of Torah to be revealed in the messianic era, see *Zohar Hadash*, 96c (*Tiqqunim*). For other references, see Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*, 375, n. 170.

³²⁴ Babylonian Talmud, *Berakhot* 34b; *Sanhedrin* 99a.

³²⁵ *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkhot Melakhim* 12: 2.

³²⁶ The point is well expressed by Ryback, *El Qes ha-Tiqqun*, 100: 'From all of this we can also understand why study in this world is compared to vapor (*hevel*) in relationship to the Torah of

Lacan, expounding the Freudian notion that civilization begins with the sinful drama of the murder of the father, an inaugural act of transgression that establishes the institution of law: 'We are, in fact, led to the point where we accept the formula that without a transgression there is no access to *jouissance*, and, to return to Saint Paul, that that is precisely the function of the Law. Transgression in the direction of *jouissance* only takes place if it is supported by the oppositional principle, by the forms of the Law'.³²⁷ Transgression is the measure of law. A similar theme resounds in the following comments of Foucault in his reflections on the thought of Blanchot:

In fact, the presence of the law is its concealment. Sovereignly, the law haunts cities, institutions, conduct, and gestures; whatever one does, however great the disorder and carelessness, it has already applied its might... Taking liberties is not enough to interrupt it; you might think that you have detached yourself from it and can observe its exercise from without. The moment you believe that you can read its decrees from afar and that they apply only to other people is the moment you are closest to the law... Yet this perpetual manifestation never illuminates what the law says or wants: the law is not the principle or inner rule of conduct. It is the outside that envelops conduct, thereby removing it from all interiority; it is the darkness beyond its borders; it is the void that surrounds it, converting, unknown to anyone, its singularity into the gray monotony of the universal and opening around it a space of uneasiness, of dissatisfaction, of multiplied zeal. And of transgression. How could one know the law and truly experience it, how could one force it to come into view, to exercise its powers clearly, to speak, without provoking it, without pursuing it into its recesses, without resolutely going even farther into the outside into which it is always receding?... That is why transgression endeavors to overstep prohibition in an attempt to attract the law to itself; it always surrenders to the attraction of the essential withdrawal of the law; it obstinately advances into the opening of an invisibility over which it will never

the messiah, for these are matters of the bodies of Torah (*gufei torah*), laws and customs, which precede the Torah of the messiah that is involved with the soul of the Torah (*nishmat torah*), which is esoteric wisdom (*hokhmat ha-nistar*). Therefore, this Torah is revealed with the completion of the rectification of this world like the spirit of life that enters the body after it has been created. But this is only an image since the need to comprehend and to fulfil what is called the bodies of Torah is demanded of the soul prepared and capable of the worship of the Lord. All the more so that not every man is capable of enduring the secrets of Torah, the rational soul (*neshamah sikhlit*) within it, but only the man who has inherited a pure heart and firm spirit has the brain to absorb the messianic Torah. A sign for this is that the letters *mashiah* are the same as *yesh moah*, that is, if one has a brain (*yesh moah*) then the messiah (*mashiah*) will come, but if there is no brain there is no messiah, for they must acquire for themselves the augmentation of brains from the power of wisdom hidden in the book of life.

³²⁷ Lacan, *Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII*, 177. The logic employed by Lacan is also evident in his remark in *Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book I*, 221: 'Perversion is an experience which allows one to enter more deeply into what one can call, in the full sense, the human passion.' Just as transgression is the measure of law, perversion is the gauge by which we can comprehend passion.

triumph; insanely, it endeavors to make the law appear in order to be able to venerate it and dazzle it with its own luminous face; all it ends up doing is reinforcing the law in its weakness—the lightness of the night that is invincible, impalpable substance. The law is the shadow toward which every gesture necessarily advances; it is itself the shadow of the advancing gesture.³²⁸

The mystical impulse in Judaism (as in other religions) tests the centre of the tradition at its limits. That which demarcates and dissipates the limit may be called transgressive.³²⁹ In this sense, the attitude I am attributing to kabbalistic sources is suitably designated ‘hypernomian’, for the effort to go beyond the limit of the law enacts its proper boundary. Unlike Scholem, I do not attribute this aspect of the kabbalistic phenomenon to the inherently amorphous nature of mystical experience. On the contrary, as I have argued on phenomenological and hermeneutical grounds, even formlessness is experienced as form, albeit the form of formlessness.³³⁰ This is just another way of stating the paradox that the hand that writes the law is the hand that erases the law, indeed, erases it as it is written.³³¹ Can we, however, imagine erasure with no trace of that which has been erased?

From this perspective it might be said that hypernomianism lies coiled like a serpent in the heart of law in Judaism. Hence, employing the rabbinic misreading of the word *ḥarut*, ‘incised’, in the verse, ‘The tablets were God’s work, and the writing was God’s writing, incised upon the tablets’ (Exod. 32: 16), as *ḥerut*, that is, ‘freedom’,³³² the author of *Tiqqunei Zohar* remarks that this freedom is related to the Tree of Life.³³³ In an astonishing reversal of the rabbinic interpretation, the kabbalistic text proffers the view that freedom is liberation from and not compliance with the law, but it is a freedom from the law that is nevertheless deduced from the description of the tablets

³²⁸ Foucault, *Maurice Blanchot*, 33–5. The transgressive gesture is linked to the act of writing, which is identified more specifically as the disappearance of the writer, in Foucault’s ‘What Is an Author?’, 116: ‘Writing unfolds like a game that invariably goes beyond its own rules and transgresses its limits. In writing, the point is not to manifest or exalt the act of writing, nor is it to pin a subject within language; it is rather a question of creating a space into which the writing subject constantly disappears.’ On Foucault’s notion of transgression as an affirmation of the limits of being, see O’Connor, ‘Foucault’; Carrete, *Foucault and Religion*, 81–2.

³²⁹ My language here betrays the influence of Foucault’s ‘Preface to Transgression’.

³³⁰ Wolfson, ‘Negative Theology’.

³³¹ A similar view is expressed by Starobinski, “‘Out of This Violated Night . . .’”, 42–3: ‘Aside from his “innumerable and contradictory definitions,” God is absent. *Being Jewish* is no longer expressed in the imperative (according to the accepted commandments), but in the conditional (in a groping hypothesis): *Then being Jewish would mean following God on the road of blankness and making out of what seems a divine trace a letter which is erased as soon as it appears*’ (emphasis in original).

³³² Babylonian Talmud, Eruvin 54a.

³³³ *Tiqqunei Zohar*, § 56, 91a; see Tishby, *Wisdom*, 1104.

themselves. The contextualization of the freedom from law in the tablets of law underscores the full force of the hypernomian position.

This idea is supported by an alternative formulation in another passage in *Tiqqunei Zohar*, according to which the two types of Torah are correlated with the two sets of tablets inscribed by Moses on Mount Sinai. The first set, which was broken on account of the sin of worshipping the Golden Calf, derived from the Tree of Life, and the second set, which is characterized by the polarity of what is prohibited and permitted (*issur we-hetter*), comes forth from the Tree of Knowledge. The first tablets are associated as well with the pure marble stones, *avnei shayish ṭahor*, mentioned in the warning that R. Aqiva offers his colleagues in the legend of the four rabbis who entered Pardes.³³⁴ These stones, according to the anonymous kabbalist, ‘were unified without any separation at all’, whereas in the second stones ‘good and evil were separated’.³³⁵ But what does it mean to conceive of tablets of law that exemplify no distinction between permissible and prohibited? Would this not undermine the very notion of law? The issue for kabbalists, however, is never abrogation of Jewish law in isolation from its fulfilment, for transgressing beyond the limit of the law facilitates the determination of the boundaries of the law, just as keeping within the boundaries of the law promotes the demarcation of the limit of the law. The Torah from the Tree of Life, in contrast to the Torah of the Tree of Knowledge, does not allow for a separation of *torah* and *miṣwah*, teaching and ritual, which are engendered respectively as male and female, for this Torah is ‘from the side of the emanation’, the world of sefirotic unity in which there is no ontological differentiation (*afraṣhuta*).³³⁶ In this state, accordingly, there is lawfulness without the possibility of lawlessness; the outlaw is the one embedded deepest within the law.

To state the issue in somewhat less enigmatic terms: The author of *Ra’aya Meheimna* and *Tiqqunei Zohar* accepted the standard kabbalistic orientation regarding the importance of ritual observance in the current historical epoch.³³⁷ Transgression results in the separation of masculine and feminine potencies of the divine, which is reflected in the exigency of Israel’s exile. ‘Concerning *Shekhinah* it is said “Do not look upon me because I am blackened” (Song 1: 6), for she is in exile and his throne is blemished on

³³⁴ Babylonian Talmud, Hagigah 14b. As a number of scholars have pointed out, the warning of Aqiva not to confuse the marble stones for water corresponds to one of the dangers confronting the one who ascends to the chariot at the sixth palace according to some of the extant sources. For a comprehensive discussion of this motif, which takes into account previous explanations, see Morray-Jones, *Transparent Illusion*.

³³⁵ *Tiqqunei Zohar*, § 40, 80b.

³³⁶ *Zohar* 3: 82b–83a (*Ra’aya Meheimna*).

³³⁷ See Giller, *Enlightened Will Shine*, 81–121; Mopsik, *Les Grands Textes*, 207–11.

account of the sins of Israel, for the souls of Israel are there. On account of this the one who rectifies the throne in his prayers and through his ritual deeds is praiseworthy'.³³⁸ In the time of exile, the enemies of Israel, identified as Esau, Ishmael, and the seventy nations, are all in a state of peace and prosperity, whereas Israel is oppressed and impoverished.³³⁹ Those engaged in the study of Oral Torah are identified as the 'daughters' of Israel spared the decree of Pharaoh that all firstborn Israelite males were to be thrown into the Nile, which here stands symbolically for the sea of demonic impurity.³⁴⁰ Exile is described as a state wherein poverty rules over Israel, a spiritual destitution that is identified more specifically as the impoverishment of Torah, which results in the death of those who transgress the commandments.³⁴¹

Not only is it the case that Israel's exilic predicament is related to the neglect of both the Torah and the commandments,³⁴² but the light of the Oral Torah, which is linked to ritual performance (based on Prov. 6: 23), is portrayed as the means through which the final redemption shall occur: 'Through it the holy One, blessed be he, will be revealed to Moses in the Torah in the final exile in the manner of the first redemption, concerning which it says, "The angel of the Lord appeared to him in the blazing fire out of the bush" (Exod. 2: 3). In the first [exile], it was through the burning bush of prophecy, but in the final exile it is through the burning bush of Torah'.³⁴³ Messianic redemption comes, therefore, through *Shekhinah*, the fire of Torah that exceeds the level of prophecy associated with the first redemption. When judged from this vantage-point, it is incontestable that this kabbalist embraced the more general acceptance of halakhah prevalent in kabbalistic literature. Consider as well the following passage, which unequivocally affirms the nomian perspective:

Those who are engaged in Torah and the commandments for the sake of the holy One, blessed be he, and his *Shekhinah*, not in order to receive a prize, but as a son who is obligated in the honour of his father and mother, such a one is certainly bound to and inscribed in the Central Pillar³⁴⁴ and his *Shekhinah*, as if he were one with it. But the one who has Torah without the commandment or the commandment without Torah, it is as if there were separation within him. The one and the other should be like a tree whose branches spread to the right and to the left, and one tree is in the middle of the two.³⁴⁵

³³⁸ *Tiqqunei Zohar*, Introduction, 3b. ³³⁹ *Ibid.*, § 21, 52a. ³⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 53b.

³⁴¹ *Ibid.*, § 69, 119a. ³⁴² *Ibid.*, § 21, 53a. ³⁴³ *Ibid.* 51a.

³⁴⁴ A reference to the sixth emanation, which is also depicted as the King who unites with the Matrona.

³⁴⁵ *Zohar* 2: 119a (*Ra'aya Meheimna*).

The nomian approach notwithstanding, the same author discerned in ritual observance an aspect of piety that points beyond the threshold of ritual observance. The teleological fulfilment of Torah is the mystical insight, *da'at* or consciousness, that all things are holy, the shell and the core, the foreskin and the corona. In an extraordinary passage from *Tiqqunei Zohar*, exile is depicted as the plight in which the people of Israel, *Shekhinah*, and the holy One are all impoverished since the divine is displaced from the space of his permanent dwelling in the Jerusalem temple. The particular vantage-point from which both the holy One and *Shekhinah* are considered impoverished is the *ṣaddiq*, the phallic aspect, which has been blemished on account of the sexual transgressions of the children of Israel below. In this defective state, the procreative attribute of God, the righteous foundation of the world, is compared (on the basis of Job 14: 11) to the river that has dried up.³⁴⁶ The optimal situation is characterized as a time when the female is reunited with the male so that the latter has a permanent resting-place. As a consequence of the phallic overflow the destitute *Shekhinah*, compared to the parched garden, is irrigated and thereby transformed into a river, an image that no doubt signifies her gender transformation from barren female to fecund male.

What is especially important for my interest is the description of the dual nature of *Shekhinah* offered in this context, which is related more specifically to the symbol of the Oral Torah: 'She is [called] kabbalah when she receives from the master of charity (*ba'al ṣedaqah*), which is the Written Torah. When she approaches him to receive she is called halakhah, and when she receives from him she is called kabbalah. . . . Halakhah is from the left side, kabbalah is from the right side'.³⁴⁷ *Shekhinah* is identified as the Oral Torah in contrast to the masculine Written Torah. But the Oral Torah is further divided into two aspects, the legalistic (halakhah) and the mystical (kabbalah). In the first phase of the redemptive process, *Shekhinah* is manifest in the form of halakhah, for she is on the way to receive from the masculine (the word *halakhah* is from the root *halakh*, to go or to be on the way); in the second phase, however, *Shekhinah* is transformed from halakhah to kabbalah, for she has received the overflow from the male (the word *qabbalah* is from the root *qibbel*, to receive). Just as the exile is related primarily to the drying-up of the phallic potency, so the redemption is depicted as the restored virility of the

³⁴⁶ *Tiqqunei Zohar*, § 21, 58a. On the impoverished state of both the ninth and tenth gradations, *Yesod* and *Malkhut*, see *ibid.* 45b. In that context, the displaced status of the phallic *Yesod* accounts for the name *bar*, which is related especially to the expression *nashshequ bar* in Ps. 2: 12, whereas the feminine *Shekhinah* receives the name *barayta*, the technical term for the tannaitic material found outside the canonical Mishnah.

³⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, § 21, 58a.

phallus. The overflow causes the masculine *waw* to unite with the feminine *dalet*, the result of which is that the latter is transformed into the letter *he*, which is to say, the insolvent *Shekhinah* is repositioned as the final letter of the Tetragrammaton. This repositioning entails an ontological transformation, which is related as well to the claim that the word *ṣaddiq* (the righteous one) is converted to *ṣedaqah* (charity).³⁴⁸ Redemption signifies the restoration of the feminine to the masculine, but also the refinement of masculinity itself, the elevation of *ṣaddiq* to *ṣedaqah*.

In the same section of *Tiqqunei Zohar*, a threefold classification is applied to *Shekhinah*:

She is called the halakhah of the king when she approaches him with the two legs, which are the two pillars of truth.³⁴⁹ When she is lifted to the body by the two arms of the king,³⁵⁰ she is called kabbalah. When he kisses her with his mouth, she is called the Oral Torah. . . . When she rises on her feet in the final exile, she is called the halakhah given to Moses at Sinai; when she rests in the arms of the king, she is called the kabbalah³⁵¹ given to Moses at Sinai; when she rests in the mouth of the king, immediately [it says] 'I spoke to him mouth to mouth' (Num. 12: 5).³⁵²

This passage is extremely important, for it indicates that the symbolic valence of the Oral Torah relates to an ontological condition that exceeds even the state wherein the term kabbalah appropriately applies to *Shekhinah*. The three states of being that are assigned to *Shekhinah*, which consist of halakhah, kabbalah, and Oral Torah, correspond in a sequential manner to three stages in the redemptive process: halakhah denotes the beginning of this process when *Shekhinah* rises to her feet to go to unite with the masculine; kabbalah denotes the second phase when *Shekhinah* has been received into the arms of the masculine; and Oral Torah signifies the ultimate redemption when *Shekhinah* unites with the masculine through the kiss and she is thus described as resting in the mouth of the king. The true realization of Oral Torah, therefore, lies beyond both halakhah and kabbalah. It is a state of complete union between *Shekhinah* and the holy One, which is related to the scriptural

³⁴⁸ *Tiqqunei Zohar*, § 21, 58b.

³⁴⁹ The symbolic reference is to the seventh and eighth gradations, *Neṣaḥ* and *Hod*, which are often depicted as the two legs or the two pillars of truth.

³⁵⁰ That is, the fourth and fifth gradations, *Ḥesed* and *Din*, which are depicted as the two arms of the divine anthropos.

³⁵¹ In the Margalioth edition of which I have availed myself, a typographical error occurs here, for in place of the word 'kabbalah' there appears 'halakhah', even though the expression 'halakhah given to Moses at Sinai' was already applied to *Shekhinah* in the first stage of the redemptive process when she rises to her feet to unite with the masculine potency. The obviously correct reading is 'kabbalah given to Moses at Sinai', which I have restored based on other editions of the text including the first (Mantua, 1558), 61b.

³⁵² *Tiqqunei Zohar*, § 21, 46a–b.

account of the mouth-to-mouth revelation of God to Moses, a theme that is also conveyed by the image of the kiss. The three aspects of *Shekhinah* can be viewed as three phases in the passionate play between masculine and feminine potencies of the divine. Reparation is not a rejection of law, but its teleological actualization in the constitution of Oral Torah in its mystical valence as the culmination of the erotic drama.

The point can be best illustrated from the messianic movement surrounding Sabbatai Ševi that evolved in the seventeenth century. In the literature produced by the leading figures of the movement, there was much debate concerning the question of the temporary or permanent postponement of traditional religious laws and customs. One view, however, that extreme and moderate Sabbatians shared was that the ‘strange acts’ (*ma‘asim zarim*) of defiance were endowed with religious significance, for they are dialectically related to the halakhic tradition. That is, breaking the law was done for the sake of fulfilling it. Consider, for example, the following passage from *Liqquṭei Raza de-Malka Meshiḥa*, a collection of Nathan of Gaza’s teachings concerning the secret of the messianic king extant in manuscript:

It is known that the nations of the word are called profane (*ḥol*), and this is the secret [of the rabbinic injunction that] the non-Jew who observes the Sabbath should be punished by death. But Israel is called holy (*qadosh*) [as in the verse] ‘Israel was holy to the Lord’ (Jer. 2: 3), and the messianic king is the holy of the holies (*qodesh qodashim*). How is it possible for him to be in the gradation of the profane? Rather the meaning is that in the future he will go out from his holy gradation with a direct intention, and he will enter the gradation of the profane for the sake of the redemption of Israel, to effect purifications and rectifications (*berurim we-tiqqunim*). Therefore his name is called *bar niflei*.³⁵³

In this context, the esoteric significance of the talmudic title of the messiah, *bar niflei*,³⁵⁴ one who ‘stumbles’ or ‘falls’, relates to the phenomenon of intentional sinning on the part of the redeemer.³⁵⁵ The crossing of the boundary from holy to profane, symbolically enacted in the act of apostasy, is for the benefit of Israel. For Sabbatai Ševi and his supporters, therefore, acts of breaking the law were considered themselves religious rites. More paradoxical than the notion of the holy sinner is the idea of cultic sinning, which

³⁵³ MS New York, Columbia University x893 z8, fol. 9a. The passage is mentioned by Scholem, *Sabbatai Ševi*, 808.

³⁵⁴ Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 96b.

³⁵⁵ The Sabbatian understanding of the rabbinic name for the messiah, *bar niflei*, most likely reflects the interpretation of this name in *Zohar* 3: 279a (*Ra‘aya Meheimna*). Scholem, *Sabbatai Ševi*, 134, notes that in Nathan’s letter of 1675 addressed to the rabbis of Kastoria, the talmudic appellation *bar niflei* is used to denote Sabbatai Ševi’s depression, his state of ‘fallenness’ and alienation from other people. See *ibid.* 612.

in some cases even involved uttering a blessing or a liturgical formula before a transgression was committed, the best-known example of this phenomenon being Sabbatai Şevi's own purported benediction (reported by Moses ben Ḥabib) over eating *ḥeleb*, the ritually forbidden sacrificial fat of the kidney, 'Blessed are you, O Lord, who renders permissible that which is forbidden', the subversive transformation (attested in classical midrashic literature³⁵⁶) of the formula *mattir asurim*, 'the one who releases those who are imprisoned' (Ps. 146: 7), to *mattir issurim*, 'the one who renders permissible that which is forbidden'.³⁵⁷ In Sabbatian ideology, the overturning of Jewish ritual is itself a ritualistic performance, and thus transgressing the Torah yielded the invention of new forms of ceremonial behaviour.³⁵⁸ According to Nathan, the most important demand is to have faith in Sabbatai Şevi, and by having such faith in the messiah one establishes all of the Torah. Nathan repeatedly relates this idea to the passage in the Babylonian Talmud according to which the prophet Ḥabakkuk reduced all of the 613 commandments to the verse, 'the righteous man lives through his faith' (Hab. 2: 4).³⁵⁹ The original Hebrew reads *şaddiq be-emunato yiḥyeh*, which is taken by Sabbatians to be an encoded allusion to the messiah since the first letters of these three words spell *şevi*.³⁶⁰ The important point for this analysis is that belief in the messianic figure constitutes the fulfilment of Torah, which is realized in the one commandment that comprises all of the commandments. To illustrate the point I cite another passage from the aforementioned *Liqqutei Raza de-Malka Meshiḥa*:

The true messiah revealed the secret of the Godhead, which was hidden . . . And it is known that knowledge of the true God is equivalent to all the rest of the Torah . . . as it says in the Talmud in [the tractate of] Makkot:³⁶¹ R. Simlai expounded that the 613 commandments were given to Moses at Sinai. David came and established them on eleven. Micah came and established them on three. Isaiah came and established them on two. Ḥabakkuk came and established them on one, as it says, 'the righteous man lives through his faith' (Hab. 2: 4).³⁶²

³⁵⁶ *Midrash Tehillim* 146: 4, 268a. In that context, the midrashic reading of *mattir asurim* as *mattir issurim* is applied more specifically to the claim that in the future God will render ritually fit all animals that are presently considered impure. In spirit, therefore, the rabbinic comment anticipates the Sabbatian perspective.

³⁵⁷ Scholem, *Sabbatai Şevi*, 242. See *ibid.* 818.

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 798.

³⁵⁹ Babylonian Talmud, Makkot 24a.

³⁶⁰ See Elqayam, 'Mystery of Faith', 34–48. On the centrality of faith in the messiah, consider the testimony offered by Nathan's student, Israel Ḥazzan, in his commentary on Psalms, MS Kaufmann, Budapest 255, fol. 98b.

³⁶¹ See reference in n. 359.

³⁶² MS New York, Columbia University x893 z8, fol. 10a.

One might well hear an echo of the Pauline orientation with respect to the question of faith and law, which became so influential in the subsequent evolution of the Church. As a number of scholars have pointed out, Sabbatai theology is marked by the complex appropriation of Christian soteriology, which is combined with the conversion of the presumed messiah to Islam.³⁶³ However we construe this relationship, it is essential to appreciate the kabbalistic understanding of the symbol of faith, for it is this symbolism that lies behind the claim of Nathan (and other Sabbatians) regarding the need to express one's faith in the messiah. The kabbalistic interpretation of the 'mystery of faith', *raza di-meheimanuta* or its Hebrew equivalent *sod ha-emunah* (a locution, traceable to *Zohar*, which is itself probably indebted to Christian terminology), relates to the union of male and female aspects of the divine. In classical kabbalistic literature, the means to achieve this mystery was through the fulfilment of traditional commandments. The notion of mystery that is operative here must be rendered in sacramental terms, for the presumption is that ritual itself is transformed into a symbolic embodiment through which the divine permeates the sphere of the practitioner at the same time that the practitioner gains access to the realm of the divine. By fulfilling the traditional commandments with the proper mystical intent, the individual is not only connected to God, but he provides the symbolic texture in which the invisible presence of the divine can be seen in its invisibility and the ineffable name can be uttered in its ineffability. The assertion that the messiah is the embodiment of faith suggests that one no longer needs to fulfil the commandments in order to attain the mystery of faith, for the latter is incarnate in Sabbatai Şevi since he encapsulates the androgyny of the divine in his very being.³⁶⁴ Insofar as Sabbatai Şevi is the symbolic embodiment of the mystery of the androgynous unity of God, knowledge of the secret of God, which is the mystical essence of Torah, requires belief in his messianic status.³⁶⁵ The extent to which Nathan identified Sabbatai Şevi with Torah is underscored in one complex passage wherein the production of the twenty-two letters of Torah by the effulgence of the light of the straight line (*qaw ha-yashar*) is said to result from the illumination of the light of the soul of the messiah in the primordial amorphous shape (*golem*).³⁶⁶ The symbolic correlation of messiah

³⁶³ On the phenomenological resemblance between Paul and Sabbatianism, see above, n. 172.

³⁶⁴ Wolfson, 'Engenderment'.

³⁶⁵ It is relevant to recall here the report that in Salonika Sabbatai Şevi had invited the most prominent rabbis to a banquet in which he performed a marriage ceremony between himself and a Torah scroll. See Scholem, *Sabbatai Şevi*, 159.

³⁶⁶ MS New York, Columbia University x893 z8, fol. 3b.

and Torah implies that redemption depends on the full realization of Torah. Significantly, Nathan contrasts the first redemption from Egypt and the final redemption of the messianic era on the grounds that only the latter can be complete since the perfect deliverance must come by way of the strictures of Torah. When the Israelites went out from Egypt they were slaves and they did not have the 'script of freedom' (*ketav he'iru*), which is Torah.³⁶⁷ From this we may deduce that liberty is attainable through subjugation to law, but subjugation to law entails subversion of law, overturning the root.

The point is illustrated in a striking way in a passage by Israel Ḥazzan. The author reports that one time the 'holy fraternity' was assembled together with Sabbatai Ṣevi (referred to by the honorific title *Amirah*), and when bread was placed before him, he washed his hands without removing the rings from his fingers.³⁶⁸ Sabbatai Ṣevi inquired why no one asked him about his failure to comply with rabbinic practice, which requires that the rings be removed before one can properly fulfil the obligation to wash the hands prior to eating bread. They answered that it is not appropriate to reflect on his actions, to which Sabbatai Ṣevi responded, 'even so, when you see a matter like this, you must inquire'. At this point, the members of the group asked Sabbatai Ṣevi to explain the matter, and he proceeded to describe the three rings, which were made in the city of Gaza: the first two were inscribed respectively with the permutation of the Tetragrammaton that numerically equals seventy-two (*ywd hy wyw hy*) and the name Shaddai, but the third was empty of any inscription. Insofar as the messiah is identified with the divine names, the rings do not constitute an obstruction and hence there was no need to remove them.³⁶⁹ The critical point is that both the question and reply of Sabbatai Ṣevi point to the hypernomian dimension of the messianic moment. The truth embodied in breaking the law on the part of the proclaimed messiah is intricately bound to the law. The abrogation of the law is only apparent, since in truth the messiah is the embodiment of the divine and hence the fulfilment of the law.

In a second passage, Ḥazzan reiterates the point with a focus on the messiah's conversion to Islam:

'For I have eaten ashes like bread' (Ps. 102: 10)—this is said with respect to the Muslim faith, which he entered in order to ban the forbidden and to sanction the permissible. Hence it says 'I have eaten' precisely (*mammash*), an exact eating (*akhilah*

³⁶⁷ MS New York, Columbia University x893 z8, fol. 10a.

³⁶⁸ For analysis of the passage concerning the three rings, see Scholem, *Sabbatai Ṣevi*, 233–6. Scholem does not pay attention to the ritual of washing the hands and what I have called its hypernomian implications.

³⁶⁹ MS Kaufmann-Budapest 255, fols. 5a–b.

wada'it),³⁷⁰ as if [it were written] 'I have eaten from the bread of the holy Torah', and this is [the import of] 'I have eaten like bread'. And concerning his calling it 'ashes' (*efer*), it is as it is written [regarding Ishmael] 'and he will be a wild ass [of a man]' (Gen. 16: 12), [the word *pere*] through an inversion of letters is *efer*.³⁷¹

Sabbatai Şevi's partaking of the faith of Islam, which is linked exegetically to the scriptural formula 'I have eaten ashes like bread'—by a transmutation of letters the word *efer*, 'ashes', is linked to *pere*, a term used in the expression *pere adam* to describe Ishmael—is explicated by Ḥazzan as if the messiah consumed the 'holy bread of Torah'. Prima facie, the matter may be explained by the fact that even after the conversion to Islam Sabbatai Şevi continued to observe the rites of Judaism, thereby serving as the paradigm of the early Dönmeḥ who became Judaeo-Muslims, straddling the fence between the two faith communities.³⁷² Beyond this consideration, however, the implicit philosophical point of Ḥazzan's remark is that the surpassing of law, which I assume encompasses both religious ritual and moral codes, does not betoken a desire to destroy, punish, and relinquish religion on account of anger and revenge,³⁷³ nor does it stem exclusively from the personal encounter with the God of Israel that defies communication.³⁷⁴ On the contrary, the dialectical tension within the tradition itself yields the way to transcend the limits of the tradition. As Nathan himself put the matter in his treatise *Zemir Arişim Ya'aneh*,³⁷⁵ in the context of explicating the cataclysmic event of Moses casting down the tablets of Law and shattering them beneath the mountain in response to seeing Israel's idolatrous worshipping of the manufactured calf (Exod. 32: 19):

The breaking of the tablets (*shevirat ha-luhot*) was in the pattern of the breaking of the kings³⁷⁶ (*shevirat ha-melakhim*), and this is the connection of the end of the Torah with its beginning, 'And for all the great might [and awesome power] that Moses displayed, etc'. (Deut. 34: 12). The sages, blessed be their memory, said 'This refers to the breaking

³⁷⁰ The expression *akhilah wada'it* is derived from an earlier midrashic interpretation of the gesture of eating attributed to the nobles of Israel after they beheld the God of Israel (Exod. 24: 10–11). The locution 'actual eating' denotes a figurative sense of eating, feasting on the light of the divine Presence, which is the true consumption. See Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*, 294, n. 89, 362, n. 123.

³⁷¹ MS Kaufmann-Budapest 255, fol. 110a.

³⁷² Lewis and Roth, 'New Light', 224.

³⁷³ Liebes, *Studies in Jewish Myth*, 106.

³⁷⁴ *Ibid.* 111.

³⁷⁵ Regarding this work, whose title is derived from Isa. 25: 5, see Benayahu, *Shabbatean Movement*, 354–50. For a more focused discussion on the secret of faith in this composition, see Elqayam, 'Mystery of Faith', 107–18.

³⁷⁶ I have taken the liberty to correct the manuscript reading in MS Oxford, Bodleian 1796, fol. 63b from *ha-mal'akhim* ('the angels') to *ha-melakhim* ('the kings') on the basis of MS London, British Museum 856, fol. 26a.

of the tablets',³⁷⁷ which was in the pattern of what was prior to the creation of heaven and earth as it is written, 'And the earth was null and void' (Gen. 1: 2), the mystery of the death of the kings (*raza de-mittat ha-melakhim*) as is mentioned in *Zohar*.³⁷⁸ [In the word] *Bere'shit* are [the letters of] Sabbatai, for he [Sabbatai Şevi] acted in this way with respect to the matter of the break (*inyan ha-shevira*) in order to separate good from bad, as is mentioned in the words of the Ari, may his memory be for a blessing. In order for the rectification (*ha-tiqqun*) to be, there had to be a break (*shevira*), and afterward... the purification (*berur*) would be accomplished as in the case of the other created entities (*beriyot*). Subsequently, the tablets would be restored as they were originally, that is, from their source, and these would exist forever.³⁷⁹

Breaking the tablets of Law is placed on a par with the cosmological breach that ensued prior to the creation of heaven and earth, an idea derived from the scriptural depiction of the earth being null and void, *tohu wa-vohu*, a locution associated in Lurianic kabbalah with the zoharic myth of the Edomite kings who reigned before there arose a king in Israel (Gen. 36: 31–9), that is, the unbalanced forces of judgement that emerged before the *tiqqun* enacted in the balance of judgement and mercy manifest in the sefirotic emanations. The breaking of the tablets and the death of the Edomite kings are linked by Nathan to the 'sinful' acts of Sabbatai Şevi, an association he justifies by the observation that the letters of the messiah's name *shin beit tav yod* are contained within the word *bere'shit*, which consists of *beit reish alef shin yod tav*.³⁸⁰ The rationale for the destruction (*shevira*) is the consequent rectification (*tiqqun*), and hence the former is to be viewed principally as an act of winnowing (*berur*), separating good from evil.

What demands our attention is Nathan's remark that the tablets would be restored to their pristine state and that they would exist everlastingly. Far from eradicating the law the shattering of the tablets strengthens its foundation. To be sure, building on the perspective of the anonymous author of *Ra'aya Meheimna* and *Tiqqunei Zohar* discussed above, Nathan contrasts the first tablets, which were carved from the Tree of Life, and the second, carved from the Tree of Knowledge; the former exemplified a lawfulness beyond the binary of life and death, holy and impure, whereas the latter embodied a system of laws predicated on duality.³⁸¹ To grasp the notion of lawfulness that transcends

³⁷⁷ *Sifre on Deuteronomy*, § 357, p. 431.

³⁷⁸ For discussion of this theme in zoharic literature, see Tishby, *Wisdom*, 276–7; Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, 65–7; and on its embellishment in Lurianic kabbalah, see Scholem, *Major Trends*, 266; Tishby, *Doctrine of Evil*, 28–34; Meroz, 'Redemption', 128–42.

³⁷⁹ MS Oxford, Bodleian Library 1796, fol. 63b.

³⁸⁰ Scholem, *Sabbatai Şevi*, 234.

³⁸¹ Nathan of Gaza, *Derush ha-Menorah*, 101. The particular text that influenced Nathan is *Tiqqunei Zohar*, § 66, 96b–97a, as noted by Scholem, *Be-Iqvot Mashiah*, 100, n. 80, although he inadvertently refers the reader to *Tiqqunei Zohar*, § 65 instead of the correct § 66. According to

obligation and restriction one must be especially attuned to Nathan's assertion that the law revealed at Sinai (*qabbalat ha-torah*) through the holy spirit (*ruah ha-qodesh*) was 'in the secret of the Tree of Life wherein there was no death or obligation, nothing permissible or forbidden. . . . The totality of Israel on the day of the giving of the law (*mattan torah*) were conjoined (*deveqim*) to the Tree of Life, and all of them comprehended the soul (*neshamah*) from the world of emanation (*olam de-ašilut*), and hence their Torah was without obligation and without prohibition or permission'.³⁸² The full paradox is underscored by the image to which I referred above: freedom from the commanding voice is inscribed on the tablets of the commandments. The law, therefore, bears in its own bosom the possibility of transcending the law, albeit a transcendence that fosters intensified subservience to law rather than its obliteration, an observance that has no opposite attached to it, an observance that is not a matter of external obligation set in contrast to inherent volition. This paradox is not exclusive to the kabbalistic tradition, let alone to Judaism in the history of religions, but in the writings of kabbalists, and especially those who attempted to provide a philosophical rationale for the apostasy of Sabbatai Ševi, we find one of its boldest formulations.

The venturing beyond the law actualized by Sabbatians reflects a tendency that is evident in much older sources and thus should not be explained in strictly historical terms. On the contrary, this orientation stems from one of the deepest structures that has informed the lifeworld of the kabbalist, a structure that ensues from the experiential discernment of the dialectical coincidence of opposites that the monistic orientation (mytho)logically compels. For the enlightened kabbalist illumined by the indifferent unity of the one, that is, the unity wherein the difference of identity is overcome in the identity of difference, the negative is restored to the positive, the profane to the sacred, the forbidden to the permissible. As Nathan of Gaza put it in his *Derush ha-Menorah*,

It is impossible to ameliorate (*letaqqen*) the evil itself by restoring it to the good except through disclosure of light from the world of emanation (*be-hitggallut ha-or me-olam ha-ašilut*) by means of the unity of the supernal lights, in accord with the level of his soul is the revelation of the light that he reveals. . . . The world of emanation is entirely spiritual (*ruhani*), and "great is study for it leads to practice" (*gadol ha-talmud she-mevi lema'aseh*),³⁸³ for by means of being occupied with Torah (*eseq ha-torah*) he

Elqayam, 'Mystery of Faith', 303, n. 1, *Derush ha-Menorah* should be considered a part of *Zemir Arišim Ya'aneh*.

³⁸² Nathan of Gaza, *Derush ha-Menorah*, published in *Be-Iqvot Mashiaħ*, 93. On the impact of the distinction between the Torah of the Tree of Life and the Torah of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil on Nathan's messianic ideology, see Scholem, *Sabbatai Ševi*, 809–11.

³⁸³ Babylonian Talmud, Qiddushin 40b.

unifies the supernal worlds and he draws down the lights to all the worlds, to the place of action (*meqom ha-ma'aseh*) in order to rectify it, and great is the power of study (*koah ha-talmud*) for it restores evil to good (*she-ḥozzer ha-ra la-ṭov*).³⁸⁴

I turn again at the conclusion of this chapter to Abraham Isaac Kook, who articulated the depth of the kabbalistic insight with the complex simplicity befitting his poetic sensibility:

There are great men like these whose spirit is so sublime to the point that from their perspective if the entire world were in their situation the commandments would be nullified (*miṣwot beṭelot*) as it will be in the future to come, in the days of messiah or the resurrection of the dead. Even so they are very much bound to the commandments, not for their own sake, but for the sake of the world in its entirety, which is bound to them.³⁸⁵

In spite of the obvious nod to nomian practice with which the above passage ends, it is abundantly clear that Kook well understood and expressed the hypernomian tendency that has occupied a central place within the mystical tradition enunciated by kabbalists.

On occasion this tendency is expressed in conjunction with the idea of the pious nature of transgression on the part of the righteous man (*ṣaddiq*), the *axis mundi* (*yesod olam*).³⁸⁶ To be precise, according to Kook, there are several ways of explaining why the *ṣaddiq* descends to the depth of sinfulness, an older kabbalistic idea, attested in zoharic literature, but which played an inordinate role in Lurianic, Sabbatian, and Hasidic sources. Kook remarks, *inter alia*, that the descent can be explained by the fact that iniquity allows the *ṣaddiq* to broaden his gnosis by apprehending sparks of light entrapped in darkness. The downfall, as it were, instructs the *ṣaddiq* that there is no joy without suffering, that anguish itself is a component of the messianic task of rectifying the world (*tiqqun olam*). The affliction of the righteous man, therefore, increases light in the world and, thereby, facilitates redemption and salvation.³⁸⁷ But

³⁸⁴ *Derush ha-Menorah*, 97. ³⁸⁵ *Shemonah Qevašim*, 1: 118

³⁸⁶ *Ibid.* 1: 169–70. Significantly, these passages, which espouse what I have called the hypernomian element, were not included in the published works of Rav Kook edited by others, principally by Ševi Yehudah Kook and David Cohen the Nazir. Roznek, 'Who Is Afraid', 263, briefly discusses the subject of Kook's attitude to the normative framework of rabbinic ritual vis-à-vis his account of conjunction with the divine, and concludes that these treatises do not yield a substantially different picture from the published writings wherein a harmonious view is espoused that precludes any conflict between social and mystical dimensions of religious experience. Roznek, however, does call our attention to the fact that Kook expresses the idea that at times it is difficult for the righteous man to be limited by the exoteric study of halakhah and that adherence to ritual is a concession to the need for communal cohesion, a concession that augments the suffering of the magnanimous soul who desires to be bound to the light that has no limit (pp. 264–6). See, more recently, Garb, 'Prophecy, Halakhah, and Antinomianism'.

³⁸⁷ For discussion of the suffering of the righteous from a different perspective, see Kook, *Orot ha-Qodesh*, 4: 462–3. In that context, Kook writes of the 'suffering of conjunction' (*ṣa'ar*

what the holy man realizes by liberating the light from darkness is the underlying unity of the seemingly binary forces, the *coincidentia oppositorum* that is expressive of the indifferent oneness of the Infinite. As Kook put the matter:

With regard to the supernal divine truth, there is no difference at all between the conceived belief and heresy. Neither of them offer the truth, but faith brings one close to truth and heresy to deceit, and, as a result, good and evil ensue from these opposites, ‘the righteous will walk on them, while sinners will stumble on them’ (Hos. 14: 10). The world in its entirety with all its spiritual and material values, it is all in relation to our assessment, and in relation to our assessment truth is revealed in faith, which is the source of good, and deceit in heresy, which is the source of evil. However, in relation to the light of Ein Sof, everything is equal. Heresy, too, is the disclosure of the force of life, for the light of life of the supernal splendour is garbed within it, and, consequently, spiritual warriors gather very good sparks from it.³⁸⁸

From our relative perspective it is prudent to distinguish belief and heresy, and the good and evil that derive therefrom, but from the absolute perspective of Ein Sof the two are indistinguishable. When the matter is viewed in this way, then the darkness is itself perceived to be a source of light and hence the magnanimous soul can descend into the depths of darkness to gather in the sparks of light imprisoned therein. To realize the truth beyond the polarity of truth and deception one must walk the path of lawfulness, a path that leads beyond the path, not by breaking the law, but by fulfilling the inscription of its own erasure.

ha-devequt), i.e. the righteous man apprehends the light in the material things from which he seeks to be liberated. Alternatively, the righteous man feels pain when he considers that he has not totally overcome his physical desires even though he experiences no pleasure or rest in the world. The torment that the righteous man feels in all of his limbs is connected, in turn, to the suffering of the divine Presence (*ša’ar ha-shekhinah*). On the suffering that the love of God causes the righteous, see *ibid.* 395–6, and *Shemonah Qevašim*, 1: 123–4. See Ish-Shalom, *Rav Avraham Itzhak HaCohen Kook*, 218–19.

³⁸⁸ *Shemonah Qevašim*, 1: 284, and parallel in Abraham Isaac Kook, *Arillei Tohar*, 45. On the unity of opposites in Kook’s thought, see Yaron, *Philosophy of Rabbi Kook*, 100–3, and on the overcoming of the dichotomy of sacred and mundane, see Goodman-Thau, ‘Jenseits von Heilig und Profan’, 179–214.

Suffering, Humility, and Transgressive Piety

Resh Laqish said: Whence do we know that words of Torah are not established except in one who kills himself over it? As it is written, 'This is Torah—when a person dies in the tent' (Num. 19: 14).

(Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 63a)

Our personal and profoundest suffering is incomprehensible and inaccessible to almost everyone; here we remain hidden from our neighbor, even if we eat from the same pot. But whenever people notice that we suffer, they interpret our suffering superficially. . . . It never occurs to them that, to put it mystically, the path to one's own heaven always leads through the voluptuousness of one's own hell.

(Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*)

HUMILITY: PIETISTIC TRANSVALUATION

In the fourth and final chapter I shall explore the inculcation of the pietistic ideal of spiritual poverty, which provides us with a paradigmatic marker to mark the path to and from an ethics beyond ethics, an ethics that rests on a foundation not subject to the binary of good and evil. My analysis revolves about a presumed transvaluation of values, a process that may be referred to, paradoxically, as holding the centre at the margins. For many kabbalists, modesty and humility are primary values that ought to guide one's way of walking in the world. The paramount act of devotion is linked to the task of becoming poor in the eyes of the other. The paragon of poverty does not necessarily entail financial hardship, even though some kabbalists have indeed maintained that spiritual wealth is in inverse proportion to economic deprivation, and that those who are in fact impoverished are to be treated as saintly by others who are more privileged. Nevertheless, the destitution discussed by kabbalists relates more specifically to the deprivation of spirit

expressed in the humbling of self, the submission of one's will to a will greater in power and freedom, a will that is infinite in its potency and hence beyond any specific determination that would characterize personal volition, the will of wills, so to speak, pure wilfulness that wills nothing from the superfluity of its nothingness, the plenum of emptiness overflowing with the emptiness of the plenum. The devout mystic must become nothing like the nothing everything is (not).

In any number of kabbalistic sources the cultivation of effacement, the realization of self through self-annihilation (*biṭṭul ha-yesh*, literally, the 'abrogation of being', in the nomenclature of later Hasidic thought), is promoted, but at the same time these sources affirm the traditional belief that human beings are created in the likeness of God's image. This anthropological conception is predicated, in the first instance, on the affirmation of the ultimate worth of every individual, a theme epitomized in the rabbinic dictum that each person is obligated to say, 'For my sake the world was created', a statement that does not imply narcissism or egocentrism, but rather belief in the inestimable value of the individual. This belief is buttressed by the speculative claim that God does not create any two human beings in a perfectly identical way, even though all people are created with the imprint (*ḥotam*) of Adam, the protohuman.¹ How can this foundational tenet of halakhah, a term that encompasses religious ritual and ethical imperative, be affirmed concurrently with the mystical ideal of worthlessness that demands extermination, the absorption of self into the nothing-that-is-everything? To answer this question we must probe more deeply into the experience of poverty.

Classical rabbinic sources, in line with earlier scriptural teaching, especially prominent in Wisdom literature, endorse humility as one of the supreme virtues that bring one close to God, and concomitantly repudiate haughtiness as one of the paramount vices that leads us astray.² No less a figure than Moses is signalled out for being the most modest of all men, a biblical portrait that has served as a model for spiritual attainment through the generations.³ According to a tradition preserved in a number of literary contexts,⁴ Hillel and his disciple Samuel the Modest, as well as the latter's disciple Judah ben Baba, were all eulogized as pious (*ḥasid*) and modest (*anaw*). At a relatively

¹ Mishnah, Sanhedrin 4: 5. See Greenberg, 'Mankind', 19.

² Deut. 8: 14; Ps. 131: 1–2; Prov. 15: 33, 16: 5, 18, 22: 4; Sirah 3: 17–24, 7: 17, 17: 28, 18: 21, 32: 1–13; Mishnah, Soṭah 9: 15; Avot 6: 6.

³ Num. 12: 3; Babylonian Talmud, Nedarim 38a. For other references to the humility of Moses in rabbinic sources, see Ginzberg, *Legends*, 6: 32, n. 187.

⁴ Tosefta, Soṭah 13: 3–4; Palestinian Talmud, Soṭah 9: 14, 24b; Babylonian Talmud, Soṭah 48b; *Songs of Songs Rabbah* 8: 13.

early stage in the evolution of rabbinic religiosity an intrinsic connection is made between piety and humility.⁵ The ideal of pious humility is epitomized in the following passage:

And thus Hillel would say, ‘My humiliation is my exaltation, my exaltation is my humiliation’. What is the reason? [As it is written, ‘the Lord, our God] who, enthroned on high, sees what is below’ (Ps. 113: 5–6). Thus you find that when the holy One, blessed be he, was revealed to Moses from within the bush, Moses hid his face from him, as it is written, ‘And Moses hid his face [for he was afraid to look at God]’ (Exod. 3: 6). The holy One, blessed be he, said to him, ‘Come, therefore, I will send you to Pharaoh [and you shall free my people, the Israelites from Egypt]’ (Exod. 3: 10).⁶

Hillel adduces the maxim for pious behaviour, to be exalted through humbling oneself, from the depiction of God as one who is enthroned in heaven but is still cognizant of what goes on below on earth. Further textual support for this ideal is derived from the example of Moses, who was chosen to be the deliverer of God’s people from Egypt as a reward for hiding his face to avoid gazing directly upon the divine glory at the thornbush. A parallel to Hillel’s words is discernible in the exhortation attributed to Jesus, ‘He who is greatest among you shall be your servant; whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted’ (Matt. 23: 11–12),⁷ a dictum that is remarkably similar to the admonition that appears in two separate contexts in zoharic

⁵ On the pairing of *hasid* and *anaw*, see the account in Babylonian Talmud, *Berakhot 6b*, of one who sets aside a fixed place for prayer.

⁶ *Leviticus Rabbah* 1: 1, p. 17; cf. *Exodus Rabbah* 45: 5.

⁷ A reworking of the words of Matthew is found in Luke 14: 11, 18: 14; John 13: 16; Jas. 4: 10. In the latter context, humility is explicitly linked to denial of worldly pleasures (Jas. 4–7). See also 1 John 2: 15–17. On the disclosure of things hidden from the wise to the simple-minded, see Matt. 11: 25. The parallel between the words of Jesus and the approbation of the simple-minded in 1QH 2: 9–10 has been noted by Flusser, *Jesus*, 119. On the need to emulate the humility of Christ, which is related to the incarnation of Jesus in human form culminating with the crucifixion, see also Phil. 2: 3–8. On the depiction of Christ as the mark of eternal salvation by his defeating the devil through suffering death of the body, see Heb. 2: 10–14, 5: 8–9, and consider the description of Jesus as the ultimate sacrificial offering, Heb. 7: 26–8, 9: 12–14, 25–6, 13: 12. The parallel between the passages in New Testament and the dictum of Hillel is noted by Flusser, *Judaism*, 512. See id., ‘Hillel and Jesus’, 78. For a later poetic recounting of incarnation in terms of the virtue of humility, see the beginning of the antiphon ‘O quam magnum miraculum’, in Hildegard of Bingen, *Symphonia*, 120–1: ‘O quam magnum miraculum est | quod in subditam femineam formam | rex introivit. | Hoc Deus fecit | quia humilitas super omnia ascendit’, ‘O what a great miracle! | Into a submissive feminine form | the King has entered. | This is what God did | because humility mounts above all.’ Newman, *ibid.* 274, suggests that this antiphon is a ‘celebration of Mary’s (and by extension, of womankind’s) humility’. It seems to me, however, that the humility being praised here should be attributed to God the Father, who humbles himself as the king that enters the ‘lowly’ form of a woman. This interpretation would accord with earlier sources. Also pertinent to the reverberation of this motif in Christian spirituality is the study of Westphal, ‘Kierkegaard’s Phenomenology’.

literature,⁸ *ma'n de-ihu ze'eir ihu rav ma'n de-ihu rav ihu ze'eir*, 'Whoever is small is great; whoever is great is small'. I will have the opportunity to discuss the zoharic passage in more detail below. Suffice it here to note that although the teaching of Jesus appears in the context of a biting critique of the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees, the wisdom espoused therein is pharisaic/rabbinic in orientation, as is attested by the aforementioned dictum of Hillel.

It is of interest to consider a passage in the long recension of 2 Enoch, the apocryphal, pseudepigraphic work that has been preserved in Slavonic. The dating and provenance of the text are complicated matters that lie beyond the scope of this chapter. I offer it as another piece of textual evidence that may illumine the dicta attributed respectively to Jesus and Hillel. The declaration ascribed to the divine voice is inserted in the midrashic retelling of the account of the creation of Adam:

From invisible and visible substances I created man.
 From both his natures come death and life.
 And (as my) image he knows the word like (no) other creature.
 But even at his greatest he is small,
 and again at his smallest he is great.⁹

⁸ *Zohar* 1: 122b; 3: 168a–b. The parallelism between the zoharic passage and the statement attributed to Jesus was noted by Johann Kemper, *Beriaḥ ha-Tikhon*, MS Uppsala Heb. 25, fol. 152a. The wisdom espoused with respect to the identity of humility and honour plays a central role in the devotional path expressed in the *Tao Te Ching*, the classical work from the formative period of Chinese thought. See *Tao Te Ching*, § 39, p. 52: 'What honor can there be without humility? What heights can be reached without being low?' In the continuation, 'true humility' is described more precisely as 'playing one's part in accordance with the universe'. The virtue of humility cast on this path calls for discerning and appropriating one's nothingness, attaining the loss of self by becoming empty, enlightened by the vision of the oneness of all being in the formlessness of Tao (§ 16, p. 29). Glory endures most with the one who does not seek it, shining forth without showing oneself, gaining much by having little (§ 22, p. 35), with/holding, holding to let go (§ 36, p. 49). The one most empty is most full (§ 43, p. 56), for obtaining Tao comes by way of reducing, turning action, *wei*, into non-action, *wu wei* (§ 48, p. 61). The pietistic ideal reflects the metaphysical insight centred on the principle of *wu*, translated variously as nothingness, emptiness, non-existence, the empty space that makes possible the fullness of being, the hole in the centre that allows the wheel to spin (§ 11, p. 24). Just as the 'existent world is born of the nothingness of Tao' (§ 40, p. 53), the task of self-realization is accomplished in being selfless in one's actions (§ 9, p. 22). On the seeming emptiness of fullness, see § 45, p. 58. A similar phenomenon, as we shall see, is discernible in kabbalistic works of piety, where humility is linked thematically to the first of the emanations, *Keter*, the crown that is portrayed as *ayin*, 'nothingness'. For a critique of self-indulgence and the promotion of oneself, see *Tao Te Ching*, §§ 9, p. 22, 24, p. 37, 53, p. 66. The observation of Lafargue, *Tao*, 238, that 'nothing', designated by the terms *wu* or *wu yu*, needs to be 'interpreted not philosophically, but experientially', seems to me to be based on a false dichotomy. The whole drift of this archaic teaching is to facilitate the consciousness that there is accord between human nature and the way of being. The sage cultivates this wisdom and lives in harmony with the way. Closer to the mark is Lafargue's assertion, (p. 37), that 'Laoist self-cultivation gives a person the spiritual status of cosmic norm.'

⁹ *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 1: 152.

The conception of the anthropos briefly sketched in this philosophical aside is predicated on the assumption that human nature is a hybrid of spirit and matter, the invisible and visible, the former associated with life, the latter with death. In the continuation of the text, the reader is told that God accorded Adam the 'glorified' and 'honoured' status of being the 'second angel' on earth. The fuller implication of this title is made clear from the ensuing comment that, in virtue of this angelic rank, a theme attested in a number of texts from the Second Temple period and later appropriated as a cornerstone of the rabbinic edifice,¹⁰ Adam was appointed to have dominion on earth and to possess divine wisdom. The import of the locution 'second angel', therefore, is that in relation to the divine king in heaven, the human is ruler on earth. It is significant that the passage cited above precedes the extolling of Adam's angelic nature. I think it reasonable to say that the passage interrupts the text, though it is placed before it and not after or in the middle, for the reader is forewarned, as it were, that Adam is not just angelic; he is also human, and hence he is subject to corruption and sin. There are striking parallels to this orientation preserved in rabbinic texts, but what is most important to emphasize here is that the biblical theme of Adam having been created in the divine image is utilized to support the view that the human being knows the word of God better than any other creature. There is thus a legitimate ontic basis to Adam's supremacy, but for that very reason there is a need to keep the potential pride at bay, to discern that genuine aggrandizement is realized through belittling rather than applauding oneself. Acknowledging the uncertainty about the interpolated words of the Enochic apocalypse, we can still say, on the basis of comparison with other sources, that this text articulates the key principle of kenotic piety: 'at his greatest man is small', overt arrogance bespeaks covert pettiness, but 'at his smallest he is great', external contrition signifies inner magnitude.

The need to be humble is linked to the mortal plight of human existence in the statement attributed to Levitas of Yavneh: 'One must be exceedingly contrite in spirit (*me'od me'od hewei shefal ruah*), for the hope of man is but the worm.'¹¹ In one talmudic passage, which is transmitted in the name of Joshua ben Levi, modesty is extolled as the greatest of all virtues.¹² In another passage, we are presented with a list of major transgressions to which haughtiness of spirit (*gassut ha-ruah*) is compared, including idolatry, deny-

¹⁰ For references, see Ch. 1, n. 93.

¹¹ Mishnah, Avot 4: 4. See the dictum attributed to R. Meir, *ibid.* 4: 10, *we-hewei shefal ruah bifenei khol adam*, 'be humble before every man'. For an almost identical formulation, see Sirah 3: 17.

¹² Babylonian Talmud, Avodah Zarah 20b.

ing the essence of God's existence, engaging in illicit sexual behaviour, and constructing a platform for unlawful worship.¹³ So abhorrent was arrogance to the rabbinic sensibility that one authority taught that walking with an erect posture (*qomah zequfah*) is equivalent to driving away the divine Presence.¹⁴ Underlying this comment is the sentiment, attested in other passages as well, that arrogance is antithetical to the nature of God. Thus, in one passage the pietistic demand that one behave modestly is linked to the dictum that there is no sense of conceit before God.¹⁵ Elsewhere the following assertion is attributed to Yoḥanan: 'In every place that you find the strength of the holy One, blessed be he, there you find his meekness',¹⁶ a view that is supported exegetically by a proof-text from each of the three sections of Hebrew Scripture. In another passage this motif is applied more specifically to account for the description of the Sinaitic theophany: 'Face to face the Lord spoke to you on the mountain out of the fire' (Deut. 5: 4), that is, God who is 'exalted' (*gavoḥa*) had to 'lower himself' (*hishppil et ašmo*) so that there was a dialogical encounter—a face-to-face meeting—between divine and human. The lowering of God from his elevated status is the intent of the verse 'The Lord descended on Mount Sinai' (Exod. 19: 20). In the same context we read, moreover, that God goes down into the grave with the righteous, which is another illustration of his assuming a humbler form of being.¹⁷

From these portrayals of God one may deduce that in human behaviour as well the ideal expression of power comes by way of docility. In another midrashic context, the verse 'to the lowly he shows grace' (Prov. 3: 34) is interpreted as a reference to Israel, who are considered poor (*aniyyim*) in relation to the other nations, for they 'walk humbly' (*mehalkhim ba-anawah*) and they 'endure the world in order to sanctify the name of the holy One, blessed be he'.¹⁸ The midrashic comment is occasioned by the discrepancy between the Masoretic spelling of the word *aniyyim*, 'the impoverished', and the accepted pronunciation of the word as *anawim*, 'the modest'. The ostensible poverty of the people of Israel is related to the fact that they comport themselves humbly in order to glorify God's name. A thematic nexus is thus drawn between abjection and humility, which is buttressed by the fact that both terms derive from the same philological root.¹⁹ Even more significant to

¹³ Babylonian Talmud, *Soṭah* 4*b*.

¹⁴ Babylonian Talmud, *Berakhot* 43*b*.

¹⁵ *Numbers Rabbah* 4: 20. The humility of God is a theme often repeated in rabbinic sources. See e.g. *Midrash Tanḥuma*, Wayyera, 2; *Midrash Tanḥuma*, ed. Buber, Bere'shit, 4.

¹⁶ Babylonian Talmud, *Megilah* 31*a*.

¹⁷ *Pesiḳta Rabbati*, 21: 16, pp. 454–5.

¹⁸ *Numbers Rabbah* 11: 1.

¹⁹ Cf. the words attributed to David in 1 Sam. 18: 23.

the ensuing discussion is the alternative interpretation of this verse preserved in the same midrashic context: “‘To the lowly he shows grace,’ these are the ascetics (*nezirim*) who acquire modesty for themselves, for they abstain from [drinking] wine and they grow [their] hair in order to afflict themselves and to guard against transgression.’²⁰ The reference to the destitute is interpreted as an allusion to the ascetics whose self-inflicted abstinence is understood as an effort to avoid transgression in the service of God. In a similar vein, the twelfth-century philosopher Abraham bar Ḥiyya notes that the man considered greatest before God is the one who is contrite in spirit (*shefal ruaḥ*), which entails ‘separating from all matters of this world and its concerns, and distancing oneself from all of its pleasures and desires’.²¹ In zoharic literature and other kabbalistic sources based thereon, as we will explore in more detail below, the association of temperance, impoverishment, and humility occupies a central position.

The various rabbinic comments regarding humility may be summarized by stating that it was widely treated as the moral virtue that could lead one to attain the supreme religious experience of dwelling in the presence of the divine. This attitude is well captured in the poetic refrain of the medieval liturgical poet Simeon ben Isaac, who was active in Germany in the tenth and eleventh centuries: ‘It is a good sign for man that he be humiliated and his spirit be broken, for *Shekhinah* dwells with whoever is humble.’²² Conceit is incompatible with the life of saintly devotion. The cultivation of modesty, which is proffered in a number of medieval pietistic sources of both Ashkenazic and Sephardic provenance, did not necessarily require the adoption of any extraordinary forms of behaviour that deviated from the general halakhic norm. By contrast, in the relevant kabbalistic sources, as I shall set out to illustrate, the trait of humility is acquired by the acceptance of an austere lifestyle that places demands upon the individual that exceed the strict requirements of the ritual law.²³ It is important to note that in this matter medieval kabbalists were influenced by the ascetic orientation proffered by the philosophically oriented pietism, which embraced the value of diffidence as a supreme virtue on the path of religious devotion. Particularly germane is the opinion of Maimonides that, with respect to the character-traits of haughtiness and anger, one should depart from the normal task, which is to strive to

²⁰ *Numbers Rabbah* 11: 1.

²¹ Bar Ḥiyya, *Hegyon ha-Nephech*, 83–4. On the ascetic ideal of *shefal ruaḥ* in the thought of bar Ḥiyya, see Efros, *Studies*, 174.

²² Haberman, *Piyyuṭim*, 104, cited by Grossman, *Early Sages*, 101, n. 112.

²³ On the link between humility and monastic asceticism in the Western Church, see Asad, *Genealogies*, 105–15, 125–67.

attain the mean (*middah beinonit*),²⁴ for these qualities are irredeemably bad for one's psychic well-being, and thus the only prudent course of action is to move to the extreme by inculcating respectively a sense of utter submissiveness and unshakeable calm. For my purpose it is appropriate to cite the words of Maimonides regarding pridefulness of heart (*govah lev*):

It is not a good path for a man to be simply humble (*anaw bilevad*), but he must be contrite in spirit (*shefal ruah*), and his spirit must be very low (*tihyeh ruho nemukhah lime'od*). Therefore, it is said with respect to Moses our master that he was 'very modest' (*anaw me'od*)²⁵ and it does not simply say that he was modest. Thus the sages²⁶ prescribed that 'one must be exceedingly contrite in spirit' (*me'od me'od hewei shefal ruah*). Moreover, they said,²⁷ 'He who is haughty in his heart denies the essence, as it says, "Beware lest your heart grow haughty and you forget the Lord your God" (Deut. 8: 14).' Moreover, they said,²⁸ 'The one in whom there is haughtiness (*gassut ha-ruah*) will suffer ostracism.'²⁹

Going against his usual recommendation to achieve the golden mean, Maimonides advocates an extremist posture as a way to combat arrogance and anger. The extent to which this position surpasses what is demanded by the law is made explicit in the remarks of Maimonides on the aforementioned statement of Levitas of Yavneh³⁰ in his commentary on the Mishnah. In that context as well, Maimonides notes that modesty (*anawah*) is intermediary between pride (*ga'awah*) and contrition of spirit (*shiflut ruah*).³¹ He reiterates the view that in the case of the haughty disposition it is best to avoid it entirely and thus one should opt for the inordinate state of abasement. This is the intent of the formulation of Levitas, *me'od me'od hewei shefal ruah*, 'one must be exceedingly contrite', for with respect to this quality it is not enough to strive for the median; on the contrary, what is required is the acquisition of extreme humility based on self-debasement.³² Interestingly, Maimonides relates that the pious (*hasidim*) were the ones who were inclined toward the extreme state of contrition in an effort to avoid the deleterious nature of arrogance, and in support of this contention he cites an example that he had seen from one of the ethical books that recounted an episode of one of the pious who realized the state of abjection by occupying an ignoble place on a

²⁴ *Mishneh Torah*, Hilkhot De'ot 2: 2.

²⁵ See reference in n. 3 above.

²⁶ See reference in n. 11 above.

²⁷ See reference in n. 13 above.

²⁸ Babylonian Talmud, Soṭah 5a.

²⁹ *Mishneh Torah*, Hilkhot De'ot 2: 3.

³⁰ Maimonides, *Massekhet Avot*, 66.

³¹ Maimonides, *Haqdamot ha-Rambam la-Mishnah*, 234; English translation in Weiss and Butterworth, *Ethical Writings*, 67.

³² The intent of the remarks of Maimonides is drawn out explicitly by his son, Abraham, in the chapter on humility in his pietistic treatise *Kifāyat al-'Ābidin*. See Rosenblatt, *High Ways*, 37.

ship of merchants. In the continuation of his comments, Maimonides cites a number of relevant rabbinic statements that demonstrate the expediency of humility and the maleficence of arrogance. There is no reason to doubt that Maimonides sincerely believed that he was making explicit the rabbinic attitude, but it is also clear from his citation of a contemporary moralistic treatise that he well understood that the notion of extreme humility that he expounded betrayed the influence of the Şufi ideal of equanimity, a notion that informed the movement of Jewish Şufis that arose in twelfth-century Egypt and of which his own children were leading exponents.³³ The philosophical ideal of intellectual worship embraces an ascetic renunciation of physical pleasures as well as retreat from the social sphere,³⁴ a course of behaviour that Maimonides recommends for all individuals who live (as in his own time) in a morally and spiritually depraved environment.³⁵

The most important point for the purposes of this chapter is that the pietistic conception of humility articulated by Maimonides embraces a notion of virtue that exceeds what is required by the guidelines of the law, which is aimed at establishing a balance between extremes. While Maimonides condones this kind of extravagance as an antidote to arrogance, he is critical of those who would emulate the pietists by adopting a lifestyle that goes against the general purpose of Torah to attain the middle way.³⁶ In a manner consonant with Judah Halevi,³⁷ and perhaps motivated in a similar fashion to react critically to the influence of Şufi forms of renunciation upon devout Jews,³⁸ Maimonides maintained that Judaism is not a religion that cuts one

³³ Davidson, *Moses Maimonides*, 94. On the centrality of the epithet *ḥasid* for the adepts of the Jewish-Şufi pietism that arose in twelfth-century Egypt, see the comments in Obadiah ben Abraham Maimonides, *Treatise of the Pool*, 5–7; id., *Deux traités*, 32–4, 37–40. See also Cohen, ‘Soteriology’.

³⁴ *Guide*, III. 51, pp. 621–2, 627–8.

³⁵ *Mishneh Torah*, Hilkhot De’ot 6: 1, and see discussion in Twersky, *Introduction*, 460–1. Twersky raises the possibility that Maimonides ‘may have influenced his son and other ascetically inclined contemporaries’.

³⁶ See description of the *ḥasidim* in *Haqdamot ha-Rambam la-Mishnah*, 237–8; English translation in *Ethical Writings*, 69–71.

³⁷ Halevi’s account of the pious lifestyle, where he explicitly rejects an extreme anti-worldly asceticism, appears *Kuzari*, III. 1. In that context, Halevi unequivocally states that Judaism does not advocate an unqualified ascetic withdrawal from the social sphere, which is the desire of philosophers who spend their time in contemplation and thus reject the pleasures and temptations of the corporeal world (see *ibid.* I. 1; IV. 19; V. 12), but he does admit that there are individuals who strive to reach the level of Enoch or that of Elijah, which is predicated on turning away from mundane matters and uniting with the angelic beings. Halevi denied the possibility of attaining this rank of prophetic inspiration in his own time, and thus one who undertakes the path of ascetic solitude will suffer deleterious consequences. See Silman, *Philosopher and Prophet*, 97–100, 138–9.

³⁸ Rosenthal, ‘Judaico-Arabic’, 440.

off unconditionally from the physical world, and consequently, he repudiates extreme asceticism as a recommended path.³⁹ Yet, there are exceptions to the rule. The immoderate humility cultivated by the *ḥasidism* described by Maimonides has much in common with the mystical ideal that emerges from the discourses of the kabbalists, for they too affirm a supreme pietistic virtue based on ascetic forms of behaviour that extend beyond the limits of the law. What seems to be implied in both Maimonides and the kabbalists, but much more centrally in the latter, is the transgressive element in asceticism based on pushing beyond the extreme limit through excess that is realized in the experience of want.⁴⁰

SADDLING THE ASS/ OVERCOMING EROS EROTICALLY

In Chapter 2 I focused on the specific role assigned to the verse ‘humbled and riding on an ass’ (*ani we-rohkhev al ḥamor*) (Zech. 9: 9), on the part of followers of Sabbatai Ṣevi in their effort to rationalize the overtly transgressive behaviour of the messiah, which culminated in his apostasy and conversion to Islam. The symbolic depiction of the Muslim faith in the image of the donkey has been frequently discussed in scholarly literature, but one point that has not been sufficiently noted is the fact that this symbol also signifies corporeality or, even more precisely, promiscuous sexual desire,⁴¹

³⁹ *Guide*, II. 39, p. 380; see Twersky, *Introduction*, 405.

⁴⁰ Here I am taking issue with the comments of Bataille, *Inner Experience*, 21: ‘Against asceticism. That an anaemic, taciturn particle of life, showing reluctance before the excesses of joy, lacking freedom, should attain—or should have claimed to have attained—the extreme limit, is an illusion. One attains the extreme limit in the fullness of the means: it demands fulfilled beings, ignoring no audacity. My principle against asceticism is that the extreme limit is accessible through excess, not through want. Even the asceticism of those who succeed in it takes on in my eyes the sense of a sin, of an impotent poverty.’ In my judgement, the transgressive potentiality in ascetic behaviour is related to the fact that sufficiency is attained precisely by deprivation.

⁴¹ The association of the donkey and the sexual drive is implied in the words ‘whose flesh was like the flesh of asses’ (Ezek. 23: 20). As Rashi notes explicitly in his commentary on the verse, *besar ḥamorim*, ‘flesh of asses’, is *ever tashmish*, the ‘organ of sexual intercourse’. See Babylonian Talmud, Ketubot 65a, where the excessive promiscuousness of a woman is depicted in the image of her desiring to have sex with a donkey. The figurative use of the ass to depict carnal lust is evident as well in *Mathnawī*, V: 1392–3, 3390–3, 4025–9 (where indulgence in sensuality is represented figuratively as the ‘masculinity of asses’ in contrast to the abandonment of sensuality, which is identified as the ‘manliness of the prophets’); and see the elaborate discussion of this symbolic imagery in Tourage, ‘Phallic Esotericism’, 72–125. See below, n. 43. On the ass as representative of the phallic power of fecundity, see Ordine, *Giordano Bruno*, 9–10. See, by contrast, the depiction in Valeriano’s *Hieroglyphica* (cited *ibid.* 14–15), according to which for Jews, and principally kabbalists, the ass is a symbol of wisdom. In Bruno’s *La cabala del cavallo pegaso*, the ass similarly is presented as a symbol of wisdom, the second of the *sefirot*. See Bruno,

which is related to the rabbinic notion of the evil inclination (*yeṣer ha-ra*).⁴² To be sure, these interpretations are not mutually exclusive, as Islam is at times perjoratively described in explicit sexual terms; indeed, in the Sabbatian texts themselves this older polemical tactic is well attested. To ride the ass one must saddle the beast, which symbolically denotes bridling the erotic impulse.⁴³ The ascetic interpretation of the messianic verse is affirmed in a passage from the *Ra'aya Meheimna*, the section of zoharic literature that includes many of the themes that became prominent in Sabbatian material, wherein the evil inclination is compared to three impure animals from the demonic side, the dog, serpent, and ass, but it is clearly the latter that most engaged the imagination of the kabbalist. The riding of the ass by the wicked and the righteous is contrasted in the following way:

Concerning the wicked man who rides upon it, it is written 'so that his rider is thrown backward' (Gen. 49: 17), and the secret of the matter is 'if anyone should fall from it' (Deut. 22: 8). On account of this Job said, 'I have not fallen from you' (Job 13: 2). The righteous man who rides upon it binds it with the bond of the straps of the phylacteries, the sign of the phylacteries, which is the letter *yod* of Shaddai, a ring upon his neck, the *shin* of the phylacteries is the chain upon his neck.⁴⁴ Upon it Elijah ascended to heaven, as it is written, 'Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind' (2 Kgs 2: 1). . . . On account of this the rabbis of the Mishnah established with regard to it, 'Who is the strong man? The one who conquers his inclination.'⁴⁵ There is one in relation to whom it becomes an ass (*hamor*) that does not cause pain to its rider, and this refers to those occupied with the minor and the major [restrictions] (*qal wa-ḥomer*). Thus, it is said with respect to Abraham, 'he saddled his ass' (Gen. 22: 3), and on account of this it is said regarding the messiah, 'humbled and riding on an ass' (Zech. 9: 9).⁴⁶

Oeuvres complètes, 59; id., *Cabala of Pegasus*, 39 and 113; Ordine, *Giordano Bruno*, 34. According to Yates, *Giordano Bruno*, 259, the ass in this work symbolizes the mystical nothing beyond comprehension. Insofar as the ass is associated with ignorance, it is the apt metaphor to denote the unknowing by which God is known. See also the relevant discussion in DeLeón-Jones, *Giordano Bruno*, 66, 118–27; and Calcagno, *Giordano Bruno*, 187.

⁴² Gikatilla, *Secret of the Snake*, 3, links the rabbinic tradition that Balaam had sex with his donkey to the image of riding the beast. See Ch. 2, n. 46.

⁴³ Consider Rūmī's interpretation of the description of Jesus—based on Zech. 9: 9—in Matt. 21: 2–7, in *Selected Poems*, 17: 'Child, Jesus sat on an ass for humility's sake: | How else should the zephyr ride on the back of an ass?' And see the comment of Nicholson, *ibid.* 209: 'Jesus mounted on the ass represents the soul degraded by contact with the body.' In support of his interpretation, Nicholson cites the following passage from the *Dīvāni Shamsi Tabrīz*: 'Jesus, son of Mary, went to heaven and his ass remained below; | I remain on the earth but my spirit has flown to the sky.'

⁴⁴ See *Tiqqunei Zohar*, § 10, 147b.

⁴⁵ Mishnah, Avot 4: 1.

⁴⁶ *Zohar* 3:238a.

The wicked man is controlled by the ass upon which he rides, for he is enslaved to the passions of the demonic side, and particularly sexual lust. By contrast, the righteous man binds the ass upon which he rides by the straps of the phylacteries. The lascivious beast is transformed into a submissive and docile animal, an entirely apt metaphor for the struggle on the part of man to control his libidinal impulse.⁴⁷ The intent is made clearer from the other images employed in the above passage: The binding of the evil inclination comes about through the sign of the phylacteries, the letter *yod*, which is also the sign of the covenant. It is evident that the implication here is that through the sign of the covenant imprinted on the male organ the righteous one gains control over his carnal desire, a theme that is related to the rite of circumcision in a number of medieval Jewish sources. In light of this understanding, we can better understand the significance of the citation of the rabbinic teaching regarding the identification of the strong man (*gibbor*) as one who gains mastery over the evil inclination, which is here understood as the demonic force that is localized in the organ that most adequately accounts for the man's masculinity (*gavrut*).⁴⁸ The means to control the libidinous appetite are the traditional commandments, which are referred to in the above citation by the technical term for one of the rabbinic hermeneutical principles, *qal wa-ḥomer*. Philologically, this expression signifies arguing from the weaker to the stronger case, but in this passage it denotes the major and minor commandments through which one transforms the evil inclination by turning it into the ass that one rides.⁴⁹

The full metamorphosis is captured in the description of Elijah ascending to heaven: not only does he not yield to the erotic drive, but he transforms it so that he is uplifted thereby to the heavenly realm. The apotheosis of Elijah is related, therefore, to the subjugation of the sexual urge. In another zoharic passage a similar glorification is applied to the righteous, but in that context the scriptural anchor is the verse, 'Bless the Lord, O his angels, mighty men who do his bidding, ever obedient to his bidding' (Ps. 103: 20): "Bless the Lord, O his angels", these are the righteous men who are as significant before the holy One, blessed be he, as the supernal angels in heaven because they are "mighty men" (*gibborei khoah*), for they master their inclinations (*mitggabberei al yiṣreihon*) like a good man who conquers his enemies.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ On the portrayal of the ass in terms of the dichotomy of power and humility, see Ordine, *Giordano Bruno*, 11–13.

⁴⁸ On a similar explanation of the term *gibbor*, see *Zohar* 1: 240b. See also *Tiqqunei Zohar*, § 21, 50a and 60a.

⁴⁹ For a more negative use of the image of the ass and its association with those involved in the stringency of mishnaic laws, see *Tiqqunei Zohar*, § 10, 147b.

⁵⁰ *Zohar* 1: 90a (*Sitrei Torah*).

The same spiritual task is related to Abraham in the saddling of the ass to perform God's command to sacrifice Isaac, and it is also assigned to the messianic figure who in the future shall be riding as the humbled man upon the ass.

An allusion to this symbolic understanding is found in one of the most detailed compendia of Lurianic kabbalah, Naftali Bachrach's *Emeq ha-Melekh*, published in Amsterdam in 1648:

Insofar as judgements of the feminine (*dinin de-nuqba*) are severe, they are not ameliorated until the time of King Solomon, peace be upon him, and this is the secret of 'Then two women prostitutes came' (1 Kgs 3: 16), that is, they were not ameliorated until then . . . but since the time has not come entirely, the amelioration of the severe women (*neqevot ha-qashot*) will not be until the future to come, and thus [it says] 'the women turned away Solomon's heart' (1 Kgs 11: 4). Therefore the messiah will come on a donkey (*ḥamor*) in order to subdue the difficult shell from the side of the masculine, which is called *ḥamor*, for from the side of the feminine it is called *aton*. . . . In the future, when all of the shell is ameliorated, then the power of purity will prevail, and it will almost seem as if the shell is pure.⁵¹

The Sabbatian theologians were doubtless influenced by these and other relevant passages, and thus I think it reasonable to propose that their interpretation of the application of the scriptural image of the messianic figure riding the ass signifies the ability to gain mastery over the sensual matters of the body. A recurring theme in Sabbatian literature, based on earlier kabbalistic texts and especially sixteenth-century Lurianic material, is the attribution to the messiah of the task of rectifying the primordial sin of Adam, which is identified more specifically with spilling semen in vain.⁵² While one can find hyperbolic statements regarding the negative impact and dire consequences of masturbation and/or nocturnal emissions in earlier rabbinic sources,⁵³ there is nothing that remotely approximates to the obsession with these sins in kabbalistic literature, in large measure inspired by passages in the zoharic corpus. The explanation of human history from the singular vantage-point of unwarranted seminal discharge is a facet of the phallogocentric orientation of traditional kabbalists.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Bachrach, *Emeq ha-Melekh*, 108d. See *ibid.* 114a: 'The secret of the donkey (*sod ha-ḥamor*) is that just as the attribute of loving-kindness is the first for the construction of the pure world, so in the world of impurity, the donkey is first . . . and with this you will comprehend why Abraham our father, peace be upon him, together with the rest of the righteous rode on a donkey, and also Rav Hamnuna the Elder and his son . . . and also Rav Yeiva the Elder after his death, and the messiah about whom it is said "impoverished and riding on the donkey" (Zech. 9: 9).'

⁵² See Ch. 1, n. 284.

⁵³ Babylonian Talmud, Niddah 13a; Satlow, *Tasting the Dish*, 246–62; *id.*, "Wasted Seed".

⁵⁴ The contemporary use of this kabbalistic orientation to explain history is brought home in a rather strident way in the remark of Ryback, *El Qeṣ ha-Tiqqun*, 91–2, that the cause of the

Sabbatian thinkers adopted such a description of the messianic figure from earlier kabbalistic sources, and thus assigned the task of rectifying the primordial transgression to Sabbatai ʕevi, a task that is related exegetically to the image of the messiah riding upon the donkey.

If we extend this state of affairs to all who would emulate the messianic vocation, which is indeed a component of Sabbatian eschatology, then this verse well captures the ideal of spiritual poverty cultivated by kabbalists through the centuries: to be enslaved in the binding liberation of holy devotion to God requires that one master the libidinal drive. In the final analysis, traditional kabbalists overwhelmingly affirm the view that the redemptive quality of Torah is predicated on the adoption of a lifestyle that advocates the abrogation of sensual pleasure, which on occasion is associated more specifically with the pernicious images of the evil inclination or Samael.⁵⁵ Appropriating the rabbinic description of Torah as the elixir of life (*sam ḥayyim*), kabbalists generally maintained that Torah functions in this way to the extent that it provides the antidote to the overpowering and detrimental influence that the body exercises over the soul. In spite of some contemporary portrayals of kabbalah as joyfully embracing the physical realm, to contextualize the medieval kabbalistic symbolism in its proper intellectual milieu one must recognize the relentlessly negative orientation towards the body. Paradoxically, it is precisely this rejection of the body that best accounts for the intensification of the use of bodily images to represent the nature of the divine in the kabbalistic worldview. As I have argued elsewhere, the impressive use of anthropomorphic and erotic symbolism to depict God on the part of the kabbalists can only be explained in direct proportion to the ascetic attitude that they adopt.⁵⁶ Simply put, the resolute negation of the physical body allows for the ocular apprehension of God's imaginal body, a pietistic application of the peculiar dialectic of the hermeneutic of esotericism—to be revealed as a secret the secret must be concealed as the secret it is revealed (not) to be.

To illustrate the point I will mention here one extraordinary zoharic passage wherein R. Yudai, a member of the mystical fraternity, asked the master, R. Simeon ben Yoḥai, for clarification of the verses, 'For thus said the Lord: As far as the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who have chosen what I desire and they hold fast to My covenant, I will give them, in My house and within My walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters, I will give them an everlasting name that shall not perish' (Isa. 56: 4–5).

Holocaust was *pegam yesod*, the blemish in the phallus due to sexual sin, which results in harming the attribute of *Yesod* through which blessings are channelled to the world.

⁵⁵ *Tiqqunei Zohar*, § 21, 50a.

⁵⁶ Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 42–5, 119, 121–2, 235–6, 271.

In response to this query, R. Simeon reveals the supernal mystery concerning the union of the King and the Matrona in overtly erotic terms as well as the intimate relation that the enlightened sages have to the divine, which is likewise depicted in openly sexual language. What is especially significant for my purpose is the initial instruction offered by R. Simeon to R. Yudai: ‘You Cappadocian, bind up your donkey and dismount, for the words of Torah require clarity. Retrace your steps and follow me, and concentrate your heart.’⁵⁷ ‘Cappadocian’ is obviously a term of derision, signifying that at the point that R. Yudai asked his question he did not have the purity of mind to comprehend the secret. R. Simeon thus directs R. Yudai to get off his donkey so that he may focus properly in order to contemplate the esoteric wisdom. Naturally, this image of the rabbi dismounting from the donkey before he can engage in study of the sacred text is a much older motif in rabbinic literature, but in the zoharic context the literary theme is invested with symbolic significance: in order to discern the mystery of divine sexuality, it is necessary for one to dismount from and to bind up one’s ass, which are metaphorical expressions that convey the control of one’s sexual urge, so that the mind can imaginatively visualize the divine anthropos.⁵⁸ This one example is instructive of a much larger and pervasive phenomenon in kabbalistic spirituality related to the nexus of eroticism and asceticism: the intensification of the erotic representation of God—in a manner unparalleled in other Jewish texts—is rooted in the mystic’s ascetic sublimation of physical sexuality.

The limb-to-limb correspondence between divine and human, a central tenet of kabbalistic theosophy and theurgy, is based on the notion of an incorporeal corporeality. That is to say, the nature of corporeality as such is determined by the assumption regarding the spiritual body of the divine anthropos that is configured semiotically within the imagination of the mystic. It follows, therefore, that for kabbalists the utilization of anthropomorphic terms to speak about the divine subject is not simply understood in the philosophical manner as an approximate way to speak of God, a concession to the inevitable limitations of the embodied human mind that desires to speak of that which is disembodied. On the contrary, the examples of anthropomorphism in the scriptural canon (and, to some extent, in rabbinic

⁵⁷ *Zohar* 2: 89a.

⁵⁸ It is of interest to consider in this context the following description of Jesus offered in the twelfth century by Ibn ‘Asākir in his *Tārīḥ madīnat Dimašq*, ‘Jesus the son of Mary ate barley, walked on foot and did not ride donkeys’, cited in Leirvik, *Images of Jesus*, 69. On the simplest level, the remark that Jesus did not ride donkeys is meant to underscore that he walked by foot to get around, a sign of hardship and inconvenience. It seems to me, however, that even in this case ‘donkey’ may refer symbolically to carnal desire. That Jesus did not ride donkeys, therefore, conveys his ascetic renunciation.

literature) indicate that the nature of human corporeality can only be understood in light of divine corporeality, which is constituted ultimately by the letters of the name. The point is elucidated in the following remark of Gikatilla: ‘The intention of the forms of the limbs that are in us is that they are made in the image of signs (*be-dimyon simmanim*), the hidden, supernal matters that the mind cannot know except in the manner of signification (*ke-dimyon zikkaron*).’⁵⁹ In line with Maimonides, Gikatilla rejects the possibility of interpreting biblical anthropomorphisms in a literal sense, since God does not have a physical body. Yet he differs from Maimonides insofar as he does not deny the ontological fact that there is a divine being that can only be conveyed in anthropomorphic terms. What is unique to the kabbalistic perspective is that limbs of the physical body signify limbs of the spiritual body, for the reality of the former, much like that of the latter, is constituted by letters. In the mind of the kabbalist, the pulp of corporeality, as it were, is constituted by the sign, and hence the text of the flesh is apprehended from the flesh of the text. Kabbalists express this idea as well by their repeated claim that Torah in its mystical essence is the name of God, which is identical with the divine body (*guf elohi*).⁶⁰ In contrast to the Christological doctrine of the incarnation of the Logos in the historical figure of Jesus, the Jewish esoteric tradition is based on the embodiment of the word in the textual body of the bodily text.⁶¹

The mystical identification of Torah as the imaginal body of God transforms the understanding of halakhic ritual, as the ultimate purpose of the ceremonial commandments is to provide the vehicle by which the soul withdraws from the corporeal world of differentiation and is conjoined to its root in the divine world of unification. Even those kabbalists who emphasize the theurgical import of ritual as the means by which the different attributes of God are united would still acknowledge that from the anthropocentric perspective this task is facilitated by the mystical conjunction of the human to the divine, a conjunction that is made possible only by the abrogation of the physical body. Insofar as the dissolution of self attained in the experience of conjunction corresponds to the virtue of humility, it is plausible to speak of the latter as the foundation of Torah, a perspective that is articulated vividly by Maharal of Prague in his explanation of why the Torah was revealed in the desert of Sinai:

Another [explanation] as [to why] the verse says additionally ‘they came to the wilderness of Sinai’ (Exod. 19: 1): this intimates to us from what perspective the

⁵⁹ *Sha'arei Orah*, 1: 49.

⁶⁰ See Scholem, *On the Kabbalah*, 32–86.

⁶¹ For fuller discussion, see *Language, Eros, Being*, 190–260.

receiving of Torah is possible, that is, when a person is not drawn after corporeal desire, and he makes himself like this desert in which [nothing of] all the corporeal matters is to be found. . . . When a person separates himself from corporeal desires and in this aspect makes himself like the desert, then he is worthy to receive Torah, but not apart from this. And this is what they said in Shabbat,⁶² ‘Torah does not exist except in he who kills himself over it, as it says, “This is Torah, if a man dies in the tent” (Num. 19: 14).’ That is to say, since the Torah is the absolute intellect (*sekhel gamur*), and the intellect is separated from the body entirely, how is it possible for two opposites to be in one substratum, that is, the Torah, which is the absolute intellect, and the person who is corporeal? Therefore the Torah exists only in he who kills himself and removes his body entirely. When [a person] removes his body entirely, then surely the rational Torah exists in him, but if not, the Torah does not exist in him. . . . Moreover, the verse ‘they came to the wilderness of Sinai’ alludes to the fact that only he who is [and acts] in the manner of the desert is capable of possessing Torah. In the manner that they said in Eruvin,⁶³ ‘R. Matna said: Why is it written “and from Midbar to Mattanah” (Num. 21: 18)? If a person makes himself into a desert (*midbar*) everyone treads upon, his learning is preserved in him, and if not, his learning is not preserved in him.’ That is to say, if a person makes himself into [something that is] without ownership (*hefqer*) on account of his being modest in the extreme (*ba’al anawah be-yoter*), and he turns himself into something without any ownership like the desert that is without owner, to the point that he does not think of himself as amounting to anything, then he is worthy and ready for the Torah.⁶⁴

The scriptural narrative that situates the Sinaitic theophany in the wilderness alludes to the presumption (repeated frequently in Judah Loewe’s writings) regarding the fundamental conflict between the spiritual nature of Torah and the physical nature of the spatio-temporal world. The desert was a suitable place where the purely intellectual Torah could be revealed, for by nature it is void of any vegetation and thereby approximates as much as is possible to a physical location empty of physicality, the space whence one can ascend to the gradation that is separate from matter (*ma’alah ha-nivddelet*).⁶⁵ Moreover, only the man who becomes barren like a desert by obliterating all desire for pleasures of the flesh is worthy of receiving Torah. This is the intent as well of the exegesis of Numbers 19: 14 transmitted in the name of Simeon ben Laqish, to the effect that words of Torah are sustained only by the one who is prepared to die for them, that is, to suffer bodily death, which is to be understood metaphorically as the elimination of the physical (*silluq ha-gashmi*).⁶⁶

⁶² Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 83b.

⁶³ Babylonian Talmud, Eruvin 54a.

⁶⁴ Judah Loewe of Prague, *Derashot Maharal*, 54–6.

⁶⁵ Id., *Tif’eret Yisra’el*, ch. 26, pp. 390–2, ch. 39, pp. 599–600; id., *Gevurot ha-Shem*, ch. 22, pp. 115–16, and ch. 40, p. 180.

⁶⁶ Id., *Netivot Olam*, Netiv ha-Torah, ch. 3, p. 13.

What is most pertinent for the theme of this chapter is the fact that Maharal selects humility as the trait that displays quintessentially the ascetic foundation of Torah. ‘Man is corporeal (*ba‘al guf*) and Torah is the divine intellect (*sekhel elohi*), and therefore a man must keep afar from corporeal attributes and he must be conjoined to the rational attribute. The essence of the attribute that is rational is humility . . . and thus it is impossible to acquire Torah except through this attribute.’⁶⁷ In his commentary to the dictum attributed to R. Meir, ‘Occupy yourself sparingly in commerce and be engaged in Torah, and be of a contrite spirit before every man’ (*hewei mema’eṭ ba-eseq wa-asoq ba-torah we-hewei shefal ruaḥ bifenei khol adam*), Maharal elaborates on his understanding of humility as the cornerstone of ascetic piety:

It should appear that a man turns from the concerns of this world and that he diminishes the concerns of this world for the sake of Torah, and by this a man will remove himself from the matter of the world and he will be conjoined to the divine gradation. Therefore, after he said ‘Occupy yourself sparingly in commerce’, he said ‘and be engaged in Torah’, that is, that he should diminish his commerce for the sake of Torah and not that he should diminish his commerce on account of the burden . . . And then it will appear that he desires Torah for he leaves aside his occupation and he is occupied with Torah, and such a man is worthy of acquiring Torah as he discards corporeal matters and he turns to Torah. And this matter is also [alluded to] in what they said that Torah does not exist except with one who kills himself over Torah, as it says ‘This is Torah, if a man dies in the tent’ (Num. 19: 14). And we have explained with regard to this that corporeal man as corporeal is not worthy of the rational gradation (*madregah sikhlit*) except when he divests the matter of his body entirely to the point that his body is not considered as anything in his eyes, and he kills his body, and he eradicates (*mesalleq*) himself for the sake of the rational Torah, and then he is worthy of the rational Torah. It is as is said here, ‘Occupy yourself sparingly in commerce and be engaged in Torah, and be of a contrite spirit before every person’, he should limit his engagements, which are his needs in this world, for the sake of the rational Torah, and then he is worthy of Torah. And after this is placed, ‘and be of a contrite spirit before every man’, for this is also the attribute by which he acquires Torah . . . and thus they said that Torah is not with the haughty, and they said, moreover, that words of Torah can be compared to water, for just as water leaves what is high and goes to the lower place, so words of Torah exist only in the one whose mind is humbled. Therefore it says, ‘and be of a contrite spirit before every man’, for by means of this attribute he also discards the corporeal attribute.⁶⁸

Viewing the Torah in these essentially ascetic terms offers an alternative way of construing the hypernomian potentiality of the law as the spiritual path that

⁶⁷ Ibid., ch. 2, p. 10.

⁶⁸ *Derekh Hayyim*, 434–5. See *ibid.*, 399–400.

leads beyond itself to no-path, which I discussed at length in the previous chapter. The obligation is not to abolish the path, but to take the turn on the path that marks the limit of its own extension. Alternatively expressed, the implicitly subversive quality of the ascetic orientation affirmed in kabbalistic literature is a manifestation of the phenomenon by which the fulfilment of Torah is realized through its being surpassed. Although several scholars have noted the ascetic dimension of kabbalistic praxis, no one, to the best of my knowledge, has elaborated on the intricate connection between asceticism and the transgressive propensity of the hypernomian realization of the law.

HYPERNOMIANISM AND THE ASCETIC PARTICIPATION IN DIVINE SUFFERING

The subversive potential of ascetic renunciation is highlighted by another facet that is essential to the kabbalistic idea of spiritual poverty: the enlightened mystic participates in the suffering of the divine. In a separate essay I explored the topic of God's suffering in relation to the motif of divine inscription by means of which the hiddenness of the Infinite is manifest in the closed opening of the open closure.⁶⁹ The insight stated explicitly in sixteenth-century Lurianic kabbalah, which is based on older texts, involves the recognition that Torah as the inscribed speech of God issues from the primeval withdrawal of light (*šimšum*) that creates the empty space (*ḥalal*) in which the concatenation of worlds evolves from the subsequent streaming forth (*hitpašḥut*) of light into the vacuum in which there remains the original trace of light (*reshimu*). The Torah, one might say, is the writing of God's absence, which comes to be as a result of a catharsis, an elimination of waste from the divine economy. Thus the Torah begins with *beit* (in the initial word *bereshit*) rather than *alef*, the second as opposed to the first letter, for the writing of the revealed word is a demarcation of the trace of *alef*, the divine oneness presently absent in its absent presence. Consider the formulation of Nathan of Gaza: 'Know that all the letters... were produced in the light of *Ḥokhmah* in the manner of lines, elongated serpents, and those serpents entered into the womb of *Binah*, and after they emerged from the womb of *Binah* they took shape with the exception of *alef*, which took shape by itself without entering into the womb of *Binah*. Rather, this form came to be in that portion of light itself that alludes to the totality of the contraction (*kelalut ha-šimšum*).'⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Wolfson, 'Divine Suffering'.

⁷⁰ *Sefer ha-Beri'ah*, MS New York, Jewish Theological Seminary of America 1581, fol. 19a.

Alef, the first of the letters, is distinguished from all the other letters insofar as it is not configured in the womb of *Binah*, but it takes shape in and of itself, symbolically encoding the light of the Infinite that eventuated from the primordial act of contraction, the paradoxical delimiting of the limitless. In this respect, we can designate *alef* as the marker of the presence that is absent in the absence that is present. The *beit*, by contrast, signifies the doubling of the text, the writing of absence in the absence of writing. What emerges from the primordial act of retraction (*histalqut*) is the name, the word by which the ineffable is spoken, which is also depicted in some compositions as the garment of darkened light that enclothes the luminous darkness. From that perspective every act of disclosure is concealment, every affirmation negation. The donning of the name on the part of the Infinite, accordingly, implicates God in the pathos of suffering.

The suffering attributed to God in the kabbalistic symbology is thus a profound and deep suffering that cuts to the core of divinity, nay, the suffering whose cut carves the space of the core, that is, a suffering that bellows from the depths of an unspeakable silence whence the word of revelation wells up in the call to creation. The point is driven home with unusual poignancy by the nineteenth-century Lithuanian kabbalist Solomon Eliashov, who portrayed the mystery of contraction in terms of the images of castration and murder derived from the rabbinic legend concerning the male and female Leviathan.⁷¹ Wrenching the original aggadah entirely out of context,⁷² Eliashov applies the images of self-mutilation and destruction to the divine; paradoxically, castration and murder denote the delimitation of the Infinite that is necessary for the expansion of the divine into the continuous chain of multiplicity. God suffers so that the world can be, for if the world were not, God too would be naught but the nameless forethought extending formlessly in the abyss of the boundless darkness that precedes the light darkened by its own illumination.

In the aforementioned study I suggested further that the way to absolve God from his suffering as the one who writes creation is through the human activity of reading, which in the traditional kabbalah is more constricted to the study of the holy canon on the part of the community of Jewish male mystics. To read, as to write, involves delimiting the limitless through a gathering of the letters scattered in the breaking of the vessels. From sacred fragments of textual interpretation are woven new garments of Torah through which the re/covered is un/covered and the un/covered re/covered.

⁷¹ Eliashov, *Leshem*, Sefer ha-Kelalim, pt. 1 82b–c.

⁷² Babylonian Talmud, Baba Batra 74a.

In the concluding section of this chapter I wish to explore another dimension of divine suffering in kabbalistic sources, which relates to the subject of spiritual poverty. The topic to be analysed challenges the conventional idea, which is expressed in medieval scholastic theology, concerning the limitless perfection of God. If suffering is genuinely attributed to God, then the latter is fundamentally limited, although not in a way that necessarily undermines the presumption regarding the limitlessness of God. On the contrary, the limits of God imposed by the notion of divine suffering are precisely what makes the ascetic route a tenable approach to the Infinite. The adaptation of a course of action by means of which one's own presence becomes most conspicuous through absence allows one to experience God's absence as presence. The symmetrical relation between human and divine necessitates an inverse of modelling, which is characteristic of the phenomenon of the mirror reflection: the suffering of the Infinite is expressed by the limitlessness becoming delimited, a process that is poetically displayed by the image of God donning the garment that is his name, whereas the suffering of the finite is expressed by the delimited becoming limitless, a process that is conveyed by the image of the mystic divesting himself of the garment of the body in which his soul is enclosed, a relinquishing of the name by which he is declaimed as a self distinct from the oneness of being. To comprehend the full force of the ideal of spiritual poverty, therefore, one must probe more deeply into the nature of divine suffering.

Just as the notion of the suffering of an infinite God problematizes theological discourse based on logical antinomies, so the psychological state to which the spiritual poverty corresponds is predicated on a similar challenge to polarities constructed in the social sphere. That is, implicit here is the pietistic belief that by stripping oneself of what one is one becomes what one is not. Alternatively expressed, one becomes greater than oneself by realizing that one is smaller than what one thought oneself to be. The pain of spiritual poverty is in truth a source of great joy, as it is only through the suffering of diminution that one is augmented.⁷³ The ethical virtue of poverty demands delivering the mind from the binary bond of paradoxical opposites. Hence, we come to a resolution of the dilemma that I raised in the previous chapter: An ethos beyond the duality of good and evil can be established on the basis of the virtue of humility, for in the realm of social affairs, the spiritual impoverishment of humbling oneself provides a course of action that emulates the plane of being wherein opposites converge and binary logic is transcended.

⁷³ The recognition that on the spiritual path the pain of suffering is a sign of joy and a source of insight into the mysteries was duly noted by Underhill, *Mysticism*, 18–20.

I cite here an example of the mystical appropriation of the ethical virtue of humility expressed in *Zohar*⁷⁴ to which I referred above when briefly discussing the ideal of meekness as strength in the teachings of Hillel and Jesus. This ideal is expressed in *Zohar* in terms of the paradox that only he who minimizes his stature in the physical world will be aggrandized in the spiritual realm:

Praiseworthy is the man who belittles himself in this world. How great and exalted he shall be in that world! Thus the head of the academy expressed the matter: Whoever is small will be great; whoever is great will be small. . . . Come and see: The holy One, blessed be he, is not great except to one who has made himself small nor is he small except to one who has become great.⁷⁵

The humbling of oneself in the experience of one's nothingness is the mark of true greatness; fulfilment of self is realized through the supreme act of selflessness.⁷⁶ The relationship that God establishes to the person is commensurate with one's self-perception: God is magnanimous only in relation to the man who has humbled himself, whereas in relation to the man of conceit God is parsimonious. A similar notion is expressed in a second passage from *Zohar*:

He who lowers himself before the holy One, blessed be he, is lifted up by him over everything else. . . . Come and see: When the sun turns its face and it does not shine upon the moon, the light is removed from the moon and it does not shine. Consequently, it is in a state of destitution on all sides and it is darkened, for it has no light at all. When the sun returns in relation to it and shines upon it, then its face is illumined and it is adorned in relation to it like a woman adorned in relation to a man, and consequently it rules in dominion over the world. Thus David adorned himself in this very pattern, for at times he was poor and at other times he possessed the wealth of all things. Thus he said, 'I am lowly and despised' (Ps. 119: 141), but even so 'I have not forgotten your precepts' (ibid.). In this manner, a person must be despicable in his own eyes, to humble himself with respect to everything, to become a vessel that the holy One, blessed be he, desires.⁷⁷

In this passage we are introduced to another critical dimension of the zoharic approach to humility, which is affirmed in other kabbalistic texts as well. By adopting the posture of one who is poor, the person emulates the ontological condition of *Shekhinah* when she is in a state of privation,⁷⁸ which is portrayed symbolically in the aforementioned passage in terms of the image of the

⁷⁴ The ethical valence of humility in the zoharic corpus is discussed briefly by Tishby, *Wisdom*, 1330–1.

⁷⁵ *Zohar* 3: 168a–b (parallel in 1: 122b).

⁷⁶ For discussion of a similar theme in a different cultural context, see Kirkland, 'Self-Fulfillment'.

⁷⁷ *Zohar* 2: 232b–233a.

⁷⁸ See *Zohar* 1: 234b, where the orthographically diminished *alef* in the word *wa-yiqra* is explained by the fact that 'it comes from a small place, for it is the small one that becomes enlarged when it is united to that which is above'. The one that is small refers to *Shekhinah*, who is considered big when she is joined to the masculine potency.

withdrawal of the light of the (masculine) sun from the (feminine) moon. I note, parenthetically, that the zoharic approach to humility is rooted in a concern for economic deprivation. The destitute man is upheld as a paradigm for the spiritual ideal of modesty. In many contexts, the zoharic authorship expresses a very special concern for the man lacking material wealth in this world.⁷⁹ I refer to one text in particular, which appears in the stratum of zoharic literature known as the *Piqqudin*, for it deals with the kabbalistic reasons for the commandments. In one part of this textual unit that enumerates the fourteen cardinal precepts, the tenth one, which is positioned between circumcision and the obligation to wear phylacteries, relates to the injunction to support the mendicant. Interestingly enough, the prooftext offered to support this obligation is ‘Let us make Adam in our image and in our likeness’ (Gen. 1: 26). In the zoharic language:

‘Let us make Adam’, from the joining together of male and female. ‘In our image’ refers to wealth, ‘in our likeness’ refers to poverty, for wealth derives from the side of the masculine and poverty from the side of the feminine. Just as they are joined together as one, the one pities the other, and the one gives to and bestows good unto the other, so the person below must be rich and poor in one unity, the one giving to the other, and the one bestowing good on the other.⁸⁰

Bracketing the obvious gender implications of this passage—the feminine is portrayed essentially as lack in contrast to the masculine, which is depicted as excess—let me reiterate the main point for the purposes of this analysis: the pietistic mandate to humble oneself is a form of imitation of the deprived status of one who is poor, a condition that betokens participation in the crisis in the Godhead that results in the separation of the masculine and feminine potencies and the consequent diminution of the latter. The poverty-stricken individual makes possible the repairing of this predicament by setting up the dialogical exchange between the one who bestows (valenced as masculine) and the one who receives (valenced as feminine). With this in mind we can better understand the logic of placing this injunction in between the rite of circumcision and the obligation to wear phylacteries: according to the theosophic symbolism adopted by the zoharic authorship, both of these rituals relate to the inscription of the divine name upon the male Jew. Similarly, the act of giving charity to one in need results in the unification of the masculine and feminine potencies, which constitutes the configuration

⁷⁹ For a discussion of the special status attributed to the economically deprived in the zoharic corpus in comparison with the affirmation of poverty in thirteenth-century Christian mendicant culture, see Baer, *History*, 1: 263–6. On another similarity between the mystics described in the zoharic corpus and Saint Francis, see *ibid.* 268–9.

⁸⁰ *Zohar* 1: 13b.

of the name in its completion. Thus, relying on the mysterious (and probably fictitious) 'Book of King Solomon', the zoharic authorship writes that the image (*diyogna*) of the man who has pity over the poor does not change from the image of primal Adam, and consequently all the creatures of the world fear that man just as they do the one who bears the inscription of the covenant on the circumcised penis or the one garbed in the phylacteries.⁸¹ He who gives charity is empowered in this apotropaic manner because he alleviates the suffering of the divine Presence, which is embodied in the person of the poor man. The vessel that God desires above all else is the depleted one, the soul that has emptied itself of all pride, arrogance, and self-confidence, and thereby mimics the status of *Shekhinah* in her exilic predicament. The only one truly worthy in the eyes of God is the spirit that acutely realizes its own sense of unworthiness. According to the language of a third zoharic passage: 'The holy One, blessed be he, dwells only in a broken place, upon a broken vessel, as it is written, "the contrite and the lowly in spirit" (Isa. 57: 15), that place is more perfect than everything else, for he lowers himself so that the pride of everything, the supernal pride, is to dwell upon him, and this is perfect. . . . The holy One, blessed be he, lifts up the one who lowers himself.'⁸²

By heeding the precise language of the zoharic text we can be in a position to understand better the full import of the nexus between the broken vessel and the reception of the supernal pride. It seems that in this passage the term I have translated as 'pride', *ge'uta*, denotes in a more precise way the attribute of *Yesod*, which corresponds to the phallic potency of the divine.⁸³ If my surmise is correct, then the implication of the passage is that only he who debases himself in this world through control of the evil inclination, which is expressed in the most emphatic way through sexual temptation, is worthy of receiving the overflow from the emanation of the divine anthropos that coincides symbolically with the phallus, the pride of the supernal glory. In another passage the zoharic authorship states explicitly that the person who humbles his spirit, heart, and will before God gains mastery over the evil inclination, which tries to subjugate human beings through the deceptive lure of arrogance and conceit.⁸⁴ When the Jerusalem temple stood, the purpose of the sacrifices was to abate the haughtiness of the evil inclination that leads one to sin, but in the absence of the sacrificial cult the act of mortifying oneself

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid. 3: 90b–91a.

⁸³ In *ibid.* 2: 132a, *ge'uta* is identified with the thirteen supernal attributes of mercy. Interestingly, in that context it is emphasized that the 'pridefulness of the holy king' is not seen, an idea related exegetically to Isa. 26: 10.

⁸⁴ *Zohar* 1: 166b.

accomplishes the same result.⁸⁵ One becomes the very sacrifice that one brings before God by slashing carnal passion with the knife of impassioned reason or what the medieval kabbalists (in great measure indebted to the Platonic tradition) called spiritual eros. Without denying the range of semantic meaning associated with the evil inclination in kabbalistic sources, there is little doubt that in much of *Zohar* the emphasis is on sexual matters, and thus the evil urge is portrayed androcentrically as the prostitute arrayed in royal garments of seduction or as the temptress who torments the male Jew in the guise of the Gentile woman. By comprehending the precise meaning of the terminology, we can survey the conceptual landscape with a clearer vision: mastery over the evil inclination associated with the humbling of oneself is related to the sublimation of physical eros, a process that is, paradoxically, imaged poetically both as riding the ass and dismounting from it.

In the words of one extract from the *Ra'aya Meheimna* section, which is an elaboration of an older rabbinic dictum: 'The Torah does not exist except with the one who kills himself over it, and there is no death apart from poverty, for the poor man is considered as one who has died, for he is a sacrifice. . . . The one who is poor and who kills himself on behalf of him . . . is a sacrifice . . . for the holy One, blessed be he, descends upon the man who humbles himself on account of his *Shekhinah*.'⁸⁶ The ultimate cosmic importance of the debase-ment of self on the part of the righteous is expressed rhetorically in one passage in the following way: 'The world does not exist except on account of those who make themselves into leftovers.'⁸⁷ The righteous are the remnant of God's nation (*she'ar ammo*) in the sense that they so diminish their self-worth that they consider themselves utterly dispensable like the crumbs that are left on the table, although in truth they alone are responsible for sustaining the world.

From the vantage-point of the kabbalistic ethos proffered in the zoharic texts, he who is small is great and he who is downtrodden uplifted. To appreciate the paradoxical implication of these sentiments, one must bear in mind that the zoharic authorship elaborates on the mystical connotation of intentionality, embraced already by Spanish kabbalists writing in the generation before the appearance of *Zohar*, which involves the merging of the human and divine wills, a union that results in the submersion of the finite

⁸⁵ *Ibid.* 3: 240a. The kabbalistic orientation bears phenomenological resemblance to a similar pietistic mentality expressed in Christian authors from the Patristic period, building on the portrayal of Jesus as the human sacrifice that replaced the animal sacrifices of the priestly cult. A consummate illustration can be found in Augustine, *City of God*, 10. 31, p. 403: 'We must be offered as a sacrifice, and the minister of the sacrifice must be He who in the human form that he took upon himself and in which he chose also to serve as priest, deigned to become a sacrifice for us even unto death.'

⁸⁶ *Zohar* 2: 158b.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.* 2: 54a.

self in the boundlessness of the Infinite, a process that is compared symbolically already in the earlier sources to the sacrificial rite.⁸⁸ The delimiting of self by negating the individual will results in the expansion of the finite self as it coincides or merges with the infinite will of God. In great measure, the kabbalistic notion of communion with God is analogous to the medieval philosophical idea of conjunction (*devequt*), inasmuch as the phenomenological presumption underlying both sorts of experience is predicated on the belief that true individuality is affirmed by negating the limited self of the embodied person.⁸⁹ In the philosophical tradition, one is most fully oneself when one is conjoined to the Active Intellect, but in being conjoined to the Active Intellect the particularity of one's own facticity is dissolved in the expanded consciousness of the universal mind. Similarly, for the kabbalist, the goal is to be conjoined to the luminous emanations that constitute the revealed aspect of God. The possibility for mystical communion, which is expressed in a number of relatively early sources in the language of union or immersion of the self (and in context this is limited to the Jewish male) in the Godhead, is rendered possible by the ontological assumption that I examined in great length in Chapter 1: the soul of the Jew derives from the sefirotic tree. Accordingly, there is an isomorphic relation between the imaginal body of God and the body politic of the community of Israel. The discussion in scholarly literature regarding the possibility of mystical union is misconstrued inasmuch as the ontic identification of the Jewish soul with the divine necessitates the logical possibility of union between them. When the matter is cast in this light, it also becomes clear that attempts to distinguish the theurgical-theosophical and ecstatic-mystical tendencies on this score may be erroneous. The kabbalistic insistence on the confluence of the finite human will and infinite divine will is an experience that is concomitantly theurgical and ecstatic, and thus it may be viewed from two perspectives, theocentric and anthropocentric. The typological splintering of the religious experience cultivated by kabbalists is a scholarly convention that has gained a great deal of currency of late, but one that does not do justice to the rich and complex texture of the visionary ecstasy communicated in kabbalistic texts, which involves the annihilation and effacement of the individual's will brought about by the restoration of the soul to its ontological root.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ See Tishby, *Wisdom*, 946–62, 983–7, 994–8.

⁸⁹ Scholem, *Major Trends*, 23–24; id., *On the Kabbalah*, 10; id., *Kabbalah*, 44, 50–1; Tishby, *Wisdom*, 975–81.

⁹⁰ The ecstatic element underlying the early kabbalistic discussions of the experience of communion was well appreciated by Tishby, *Wisdom*, 985–6. In particular, Tishby explicitly mentions self-effacement and self-annihilation as a component of the mystical ecstasy realized through communion of thought and will.

In subsequent kabbalistic literature a more precise connection is made between the virtue of humility and mystical quietism, which proceeds from the experience of union with the divine. Thus, for example, Cordovero writes in his moralistic treatise *Tomer Devorah* that the pietistic attribute correlated with the first emanation *Keter*, which is also called *Ayin*, is humility:⁹¹

The essence of humility is that he should not find in himself any value at all, but he should think of himself as nothing . . . until the point that he is in his own eyes the lowest of all creatures, very much despised and abhorred. When he strives constantly to attain this attribute all the other attributes will follow after it, for just as *Keter*, the first attribute in him, appears as nothing before its emanator, so a person must make himself into an actual nothing . . . and this will be the cause of the acquisition of the good attributes.⁹²

The virtue of humility, to think of oneself as nothing, is transformed by Cordovero into the mystical goal of union, which involves becoming an ‘actual nothing’ (*ayin mammash*), a locution that had a particularly profound impact on the version of Beshtian Hasidism advocated by Dov Baer, the Maggid of Miedzyrzecz, and his disciples.⁹³ The intent of Cordovero’s language is that one becomes this actual nothing by emulating the first of the ten divine attributes, which is *Ayin*, the nothing that is no thing but all things. It is likely that Cordovero’s remarks reflect an idea attested in much older sources concerning the metamorphosis of *ani* into *ayin*, ego-consciousness into the nothing of God. The transfiguration—which rests on attenuation—is captured performatively in specific bodily gestures (*gufei pe‘ulot*) such as casting one’s eyes downward.⁹⁴ What is critical for this analysis is that, according to Cordovero’s rendering of this sentiment, the union of self with the divine nothing leads to self-abnegation, which is the mystical basis for the other ethical virtues correlated in Cordovero’s thinking with the remaining nine emanations.

Interestingly enough, in his description of the moral trait that corresponds to the last of the sefirotic gradations, *Malkhut*, Cordovero reiterates the mystical goal of self-effacement, in this context connecting it to the trope of

⁹¹ The nexus between *Keter* and humility is found in older sources that undoubtedly influenced Cordovero. See e.g. Jacob ben Sheshet, *Sefer ha-Emunah we-ha-Bittahon*, 2: 366–7. See also the anonymous *Sefer ha-Shem*, 6b. According to this text, the list of the terms applied to the first of the emanations includes humility, ‘for through the attribute of humility he passes over his attributes, and he forgives, pardons, and has compassion on all, and this is the attribute of humility’.

⁹² Cordovero, *Tomer Devorah*, 9a.

⁹³ Cordovero’s influence on the Hasidic thought of the Maggid of Miedzyrzecz has been noted by Sack, *Kabbalah*, 196.

⁹⁴ *Tomer Devorah*, 7a–b.

poverty, which no doubt refers to an inner, spiritual poverty rather than to an external, material poverty. The symbolic justification for this correlation consists of the fact that *Malkhut* is frequently described in kabbalistic literature as destitute, for she has nothing of her own and only receives light from the upper, masculine potencies. To imitate the ontological status of this attribute, therefore, one must empty oneself and assume the posture of the pauper. Once again I cite Cordovero's own words:

How does a man habituate himself in regard to the attribute of *Malkhut*? First, his heart should not be prideful with respect to all that he possesses, and he should place himself constantly as a poor person, and he should stand before his Creator as the impoverished one who begs in humble supplication. To habituate himself in this attribute, he should consider that nothing he possesses cleaves to him and he is abandoned. He constantly is in need of the Creator's mercy for he has nothing but the bread that he eats. He should subdue his heart and inflict suffering on himself, especially in the time of his prayers, for this is an excellent remedy.⁹⁵

For Cordovero, the ethos related to the first and the last of the divine emanations involves the inculcation of humility, degradation, the emptying of self that is the basis for mystical union and moral altruism, love of God and love of other members of the social community of Jews. It is surely significant that in Cordovero's portrayal of the ethical nature of the sefirotic emanations, the first and the last are related to the specific task of self-degradation. In some measure, it is precisely this predilection of soul that encircles the mystic, an encircling that fosters the cultivation of genuine humility, which entails the recognition of the sense of one's being utterly nothing before the infinite light of God. But in addition to this preeminent pietistic sentiment, it is also evident that for Cordovero the act of humbling and the self-effacement that it entails is a mode of joining in the suffering of God.

The extent to which this act of self-deprivation is a form of participating in the suffering of God is made clear in the following citation from Cordovero's disciple, Elijah de Vidas:

A person must think about his great loving-kindness, for he acts in kindness with respect to him to bestow upon him food, for from the perspective of his actions he is not worthy [to receive] the food, for 'the soul that transgresses must die' (Ezek. 18: 4). It is his loving-kindness that sustains evil and good. When a person considers his evil actions he will not take pleasure during the six days of the week, as it is written, 'My groaning serves as my bread' (Job 3: 24). These are the words of *Shekhinah* when she is, as it were, in exile. During the six days of the week she is called impoverished. Thus he should conduct himself with respect to his eating as a poor man, and this is the

⁹⁵ Ibid. 16b.

import of what is written ‘his food is in the Lord his God’ (Ps. 146: 5). It is sufficient for the servant to be like the master. But on the day of Sabbath he should take pleasure, for through his pleasure he fulfills the commandment, ‘proclaim the Sabbath delight’ (Isa. 58: 13). There is no exile on the Sabbath, and he should intend that all of his pleasure overflows from above.⁹⁶

The sense of unworthiness that a person must acquire is related by de Vidas to the weekly cycle of time, which in turn is symbolic of the process of exile and redemption. During the six weekdays *Shekhinah* is in exile, and hence one must consider oneself in a state of destitution such that the food that one receives should be viewed as a gift of undeserved grace, whereas on the Sabbath *Shekhinah* is redeemed and hence one can freely partake of the blessings that overflow from the divine source. From this passage we can glean that the cultivation of humility as the supreme virtue on the pietistic path is an imitation of the exilic status of *Shekhinah*. In realizing one’s own modest and ignoble lot, one shares in the suffering of the divine. De Vidas explicitly draws this conclusion:

Thus modesty relates to the holy One, blessed be he, but the reality of modesty is found more with respect to the lowest attribute, which is the *Shekhinah* of the holy One, blessed be he, and she is called moon, and the moon in the future will expand for her light has been diminished. They said in the tractate of Ḥullin⁹⁷ that the holy One, blessed be he, said to her: The righteous shall be called by your name, Jacob the diminished one, Samuel the diminished one, and David the diminished one. Because David was a chariot for this attribute he diminished himself, as he said, ‘I am lowly and despised’ (Ps. 119: 141).⁹⁸

In another passage, however, de Vidas follows the lead of his teacher and relates the quality of meekness to the first of the emanations, *Keter*, but he emphasizes the implicit transgressive nature of this correlation: ‘You find as well that humility is related to *Keter*, for the quality of humility requires that a person overcome his attributes and has compassion . . . Thus in every place that you find his greatness, even above, which is the place of pridefulness, there you find humility. Therefore a person must imitate his Creator and overcome his attributes.’⁹⁹ The attainment of the sense of nothingness instills in the soul the attribute of compassion, which is associated with the attribute of God that is designated *Ayin*, the divine nothing.

As I noted in Chapter 3, the description of *Keter* as a world that is entirely merciful challenges the axiological framework wherein a distinction can be made

⁹⁶ *Re’shit Hokhmah*, Sha’ar ha-Qedushshah, ch. 15, p. 429.

⁹⁷ Babylonian Talmud, Ḥullin 60b.

⁹⁸ *Re’shit Hokhmah*, Sha’ar ha-Anawah, ch. 1, pp. 477–8.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.* 480.

between right and wrong actions, which justify the appropriate exoneration or condemnation. In the sphere where there is nothing but mercy, there is no credible difference between righteous and wicked. Humility presents an example of an ethical virtue that is beyond the dichotomy of good and evil, for this quality demands the overcoming of one's attributes so that one is completely compassionate with the other in spite of what the latter might justly deserve. The mercy that stems from the mystical recognition of one's ultimate nothingness constitutes an act of trespassing; the expression that I have rendered as 'overcoming his attributes' is quite literally 'passing over his attributes' (*over al middotav*). The movement of passing over is basic to the very nature of transgression (*aveirah*). But in overstepping the boundary one obeys the very limit that one has crossed. We might say, therefore, that the humbling of self is the transgressive act par excellence, for in the realization of one's worthlessness one remains bound to the limit that one passes beyond. From that vantage-point we can speak of spiritual poverty as the transmoral and hypernomian ideal on the path that is beyond the path.

As the ideal that marks the pathless path, humility stands out as the virtue that embraces the extreme rather than the median. In assuming this posture, moreover, the humbled soul participates directly in the suffering of God. The point was well understood by Menaḥem Mendel Schneersohn, the third rebbe of Lubavitch Hasidim, known more commonly by the title *Şemaḥ Şedeq*, who remarked as follows in his gloss on the passage from de Vidas:

This is [the import of the rabbinic dictum] in the place that you find the greatness of the holy One, blessed be he, there you find his modesty. It is known that the greatness itself consists of great humility in relation to the holy One, blessed be he. And it can be explained that his greatness refers to *Keter* since it is the root and source of the emanations. Therefore, *Keter* is called *Ayin*... Even the greatness and essence of *Keter* is the great contrition in relation to Ein Sof, blessed be he. This docility relates to the fact that Ein Sof lowered himself and he is garbed in *Keter*. This is the matter of humility.¹⁰⁰

The formulation of Menaḥem Mendel perfectly captures the reversal of image and that which is imaged that is implied in the pietistic ideal of humility, which is linked to the mystical disavowal of self in the experience of oneness with that which exceeds all boundaries. From the divine perspective, suffering is correlated with the limitless assuming a limited form, whereas from the human perspective suffering consists of the limited transcending its boundaries by merging with the limitless. By means of this inverse of reflection the soul is afforded the opportunity to merge with the unconditional oneness of

¹⁰⁰ Schneersohn, *Sefer ha-Liqqutim*, 315.

the divine beyond all polarities, but in so doing it still maintains an ethical affectation in the world, albeit one that transcends dualities normally considered essential to a moral comportment in the interpersonal sphere of social commerce. As opposed to an ethical imperative that is based on affirmation of the individual moral will, the kabbalistic precept is ground in its radical negation. In confronting the effacement of God by facing that which cannot be faced, negation constitutes affirmation, and affirmation negation.

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