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Aestheticism, Rationalism, and Esotericism: Medieval Scholarship and Contemporary Polemics

NATHANIEL BERMAN

MENACHEM KELLNER. *Maimonides' Confrontation with Mysticism*. Oxford and Portland, Oregon: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2006. Pp. xix. + 343.

MELILA HELLNER-ESHED. *A River Issues Forth from Eden: On the Language of Mystical Experience in the Zohar* (Hebrew). Tel Aviv: Am Oved Publishers Ltd., 2005. Pp. 462.

MOSHE HALBERTAL, *Concealment and Revelation: Esotericism in Jewish Thought and Its Philosophical Implications*. Trans. Jackie Feldman. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007. Pp. viii + 200.

I.

A perennial desire: the aspiration to chart the map of Jewish religiosity at a precise moment, a map that would exhibit the competing and often intertwining paths traced by a generation—perhaps inevitable in any tradition in which heterogeneous perspectives have long flourished and contended. Such maps have often been composed to portray the range of responses to a crisis, to turmoil from within or without, that has rendered the tradition problematic in some way.

In the early fifteenth century, for example, the Catalan writer Profiat

I thank Nancy Levene, Shaul Magid and Julie Stone Peters for their invaluable comments. An English translation of Hellner-Eshed's book has now been published: Melila Hellner-Eshed, *A River Flows from Eden: The Language of Mystical Experience in the Zohar*, trans. N. Wolski (Stanford, Calif., 2009). Unfortunately the translation appeared too late to be incorporated into this essay.

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Duran composed what was to become a well-known sketch of his contemporaries' competing understandings of Judaism as the introduction to his grammar, *Ma'aseh efod*. After arguing that the Torah can only have its beneficent effect when approached with *kavanah* (proper intention), he embarked on a concise description of the various ways the members of his generation sought to infuse their religious practice with meaning. While they all sought the inner "wisdom of the Torah" (*hokhmat ba-torah*),¹ they disagreed about its content and source. In a classification whose pertinence has endured for centuries, Duran divided his contemporaries' quests for meaning into three categories: the talmudic, the kabbalistic, and the philosophical. Duran commented both sympathetically and critically about each of these approaches and then presented his own contribution to the quest—calling for a greater focus on the biblical text, which he judged to be underemphasized by all the other approaches. One aspect of Duran's biblical focus which is of particular interest to the present essay is his argument in favor of attentiveness to the aesthetic dimensions of texts, the beauty of their illuminations, the pleasing forms of their letters, the quality of their bindings, and the attractiveness of the rooms in which they are studied, since "the contemplation and study of pleasing forms, beautiful images and drawings broaden and stimulate the soul."² For Duran, the significance of the aesthetic qualities and power of texts was relatively autonomous from the content of their ideas.³

It is significant that Duran portrayed these four competing paths as responses to a common quest, the desire that religious practice should be meaningful and not mere rote. This common quest suggests that Duran's description of these paths reflects a set of responses to a pervasive spiritual crisis besetting the Jewish community, a shared anxiety about the loss of religious meaning—and it is this feature that gives his description its coherence as a generational map of Jewish religiosity at the turn of the fifteenth century. To this internal crisis, we can also add that Duran was writing at a time of external persecution and forced conversion, of which he had personal experience.⁴

1. Profiat Duran, *Ma'aseh efod* (Hebrew; Vienna, 1865), 3–4.

2. Profiat, *Ephod*, 19, quoted in Kalman P. Bland, "Medieval Jewish Aesthetics: Maimonides, Body, and Scripture in Profiat Duran," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 54.4 (1993): 548. See also, idem, *The Artless Jew: Medieval and Modern Affirmations and Denials of the Visual* (Princeton, N.J., 2000), 82–91. On Duran, see also Isadore Twersky, "Religion and Law," in *Religion in a Religious Age*, ed. S. D. Goitein (Cambridge, 1974), 69–82.

3. Bland, "Medieval Jewish Aesthetics," 547.

4. Ibid., 546.

In our own time, the radical proliferation of approaches to the tradition would render quite difficult the task of comprehensively mapping Jewish religiosity. Nonetheless, I propose to discuss a range of books each of which delves into the medieval heritage in order to present a path to the tradition suited for today. This perspective also helps to identify the generational crisis that these three books perceive as demanding a response. This crisis, unlike that of Duran's age, does not seem for these writers to be a loss of religious meaning, but rather, a lethal *mélange* of religious excess and religious ossification—a combination referred to by these writers as “haredization” (Kellner), “fundamentalism” (Hellner-Eshed), and “intolerance” (Halbental).

Menachem Kellner informs us that his book on Maimonides grew out of his perception of Maimonides' distress at the deleterious effects of Kabbalah, especially the Zohar, on Jewish life, and much of the book comprises a Maimonidean polemic against those effects—of which “haredization” appears to preoccupy him the most (p. xiii). Melila Hellner-Eshed's book has as one of its goals a demonstration of a conception of the Zohar precisely the opposite of Kellner's—viz., its highly reflexive and “anti-fundamentalist” quality (p. 60)⁵—a demonstration which nonetheless implicitly responds to some of the same problems worrying Kellner. Finally, Moshe Halbental's overview of medieval esotericism builds to his conclusion that esotericism is a path toward tolerance of divergent viewpoints as well as one productive of religious creativity (p. 96)—and, with explicit reference to our own day, he therefore bemoans its demise. In all three authors, medieval scholarship is thus tied explicitly and urgently to a perceived contemporary crisis.

II.

The thesis of *Maimonides' Confrontation with Mysticism*, as the title suggests, is that Maimonides can be productively understood as engaged in a struggle with what Kellner calls the “proto-kabbalah” of his day (pp. 7–8).⁶ Kellner thus seeks to revive in the sharpest possible form the competition between Kabbalah and philosophy, that perennial contest already well entrenched by the time Duran wrote his map of Jewish religiosity.⁷ Spe-

5. Translations mine except when otherwise noted.

6. Kellner cites Moshe Idel in support of this thesis.

7. See, for example, Shem Tov ibn Shem Tov, *Sefer ha-emunot* (Jerusalem, 2001), for an anti-Maimonidean polemic by a kabbalist roughly contemporary to Profiat Duran. Note that in *Must a Jew Believe Anything?* (2nd ed.; Portland, Or., 2006), Kellner also seeks to revive the polemic between Halakhah and philosophy, taking issue particularly with Maimonides' views on Jewish identity.

cifically, he seeks to revive the polemic between Maimonides and his “worthy competitor,” the Zohar (p. 2), by demonstrating that Maimonides was engaged in a struggle against those religious trends of which the Zohar was the crowning achievement. Indeed, it is “this struggle to which the body of [Kellner’s] book is dedicated” (p. 25).

Kellner’s argument focuses above all on the concept of holiness. He seeks to demonstrate that Maimonides rejected any “ontological” status for the holy but instead portrayed holiness as a purely “functional” consequence of religiously commanded actions. This Maimonidean position applied to the entire realm of holiness, including sacred objects, the Hebrew language, the Jewish people, and putatively divine entities. Maimonides not only sought to “depopulate the heavens” (p. 12), leaving it with “as few [divine] entities as possible” (p. 12), but to show broadly

that holiness is not a property but an institutional status . . . ; that Hebrew, the holy language, is not holy in any essentialist, ontological sense; that the distinction between ritual purity and impurity reflects no extra-halakhic reality; that Jews and non-Jews are distinguished by nothing beyond history, belief, and behaviour; that there is no entity denoted by the term “Israel” beyond living, breathing Jews; that the terms *kavod* and *shekhinah* do not denote actual aspects of divinity; and that there are no angels in the accepted sense of the term. (p. 44)

Kellner asserts that Maimonides’ positions on these issues were developed through engagement with the contrary tendencies in his own time, an engagement based on his wide reading in the Jewish and non-Jewish writings of those he opposed (p. 18, n. 47).

Following the model he attributes to Maimonides, Kellner’s stance in relation to his own contemporaries is also directly polemical, culminating in the following stark alternative he poses to all Jews:

So, putting the question rather tendentiously, is Judaism the sort of religion found in the Bible, Mishnah, Talmud, and Maimonides, or is Judaism the sort of religion found in the Bible, Mishnah, Talmud, and the Zohar? These are very different sorts of religions (as should be clear to anyone who has read this book). (p. 288)

Kellner mourns the fact that the Maimonidean position has remained a historical aberration, embattled in its own time and definitively defeated in the century that followed the philosopher, a defeat sealed by the Zo-

har's dissemination. As to our own generation, Kellner has no doubt about the utter triumph of the anti-Maimonidean worldview:

The hypostatization of *kavod* and *shekhinah* in kabbalah, and the fact that all contemporary Orthodoxy, hasidic and mitnagdic, is infused with kabbalistic motifs, makes it clear beyond the need of demonstration that Maimonides' "de-hypostatization" of these notions . . . has few echoes in contemporary Judaism . . . In this case, as in the case of Hebrew, there seems to be no substantial distinction between Orthodoxy, on the one hand, and Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, and New Age Judaism, on the other. (p. 289)

Here, then, is the gauntlet laid down by Kellner to his contemporaries: a challenge to follow Maimonides and live in a "disenchanted world" (p. 295),⁸ a world which "demands maturity of those who live in it" (p. 294). In this world, one observes the commandments not because "failure to do so is metaphysically harmful, but because fulfilling them is the right thing to do" (pp. 294–95)—in particular, because such a life prepares a person to achieve the kind of knowledge that, according to the familiar Maimonidean position, is the ultimate goal. To be sure, Kellner's stress on "maturity" makes the philosophical position he attributes to Maimonides sound closer to a stance more commonly associated with the Enlightenment and its stress on the link between rationality and autonomy. By rejecting the "enchanted" world, with its ontological and epistemological mysteries, Kellner tells us, "Maimonidean Judaism empowers Jews," putting their "fate" in their "own hands" (p. 295).

The alternative is a world of "charms and amulets . . . demons and the evil eye," a world in which "the notion of miracle loses all meaning, since everything that happens is a miracle," a world in which human fate is "in the hands of semi-divine intermediaries or in the hands of a rabbinic elite" (p. 295). It is, in particular, this last problem that especially concerns Kellner in relation to the "haredization" of contemporary Orthodoxy, a process that has diminished the distinctiveness of that strand now only tenuously called *Modern* Orthodoxy. Indeed, despite his rather offhanded reference to non-Orthodox versions of Judaism, Kellner's book can be

8. This term was, of course, made famous by Max Weber. See his "Science as a Vocation," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. and trans. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York, 1946), 129–56. Whether Weber would acknowledge Maimonides' Aristotelian metaphysics and religious perspective as a fully "disenchanted" approach, is, of course, highly debatable.

read as, above all, an intra-Orthodox, or even intra-Modern Orthodox, polemic.

To be sure, the Enlightenment individualism that seems to animate much of Kellner's argument must also confront the intellectual elitism that is inextricably associated with Maimonides, even without evoking the name of Strauss. Indeed, it is on this note that Kellner begins his final paragraph:

Maimonides' Judaism demands much, offers little. More precisely, it offers much, but few can take advantage of it . . . Seeking to help the few who could immediately benefit from his teachings and to minimize the damage to those who could not, he presented his views gingerly. (p. 296)

This passage—begging the question of how Kellner reconciles an Enlightenment, individualistic rationalism with medieval elitism and esotericism—brings us close to the themes explored in Halbertal's book. Before confronting those questions directly, however, I turn to a book that now may be seen as a rival bid for the loyalty of contemporary readers of the Jewish tradition, Melila Hellner-Eshed's work "on the language of mystical experience in the Zohar." If Kellner presents the stark choice between Maimonides and the Zohar, it is fitting that we juxtapose his position with that of one of the most compelling recent portrayals of the latter.

III.

From at least one perspective, Hellner-Eshed seems motivated by a concern related to Kellner's, a polemic against what she calls "fundamentalism."

The stance of Rashbi [Rabbi Simeon bar Yoḥai, the Zohar's dominant personage] and his company [the "ḥevraya"] . . . is, in its essence, anti-fundamentalist. The truth is not to be found simply in an authoritative source, but rather, in the Edenic delicacies [*ma'adane Eden*] that one can produce and develop out of it. This is the definition of an open and developing culture—that it is not apologetic in relation to development and innovation. (p. 60)

While this is a passage that Kellner probably would not have written, it is not, for the most part, incompatible with his spirit. Antifundamentalism and rejection of simple deference to authority are the kinds of modern

motifs that underlie the general tenor of Kellner's polemical stance. And yet, it is precisely the shared intention to reject "fundamentalism," by whatever name, that sharpens the contrast between these books. For it turns out that the Zohar may be read in a manner radically different from that portrayed by Kellner, who ultimately sees the work as an apology for superstition and, above all, authoritarianism.

The differences are already hinted at in the passage quoted above in its reference to the "Edenic delicacies" to be gained through the exploration and renewal of Jewish tradition. While anyone versed in the tradition might use such a phrase, whatever its source,⁹ to describe religious gratification, a strong valorization of the pleasure of the text is central to Hellner-Eshed's approach, to an extent unlikely to please a Maimonidean.¹⁰ Hellner-Eshed makes this quite clear at the outset of her study when she declares that her aspiration in elucidating the Zohar is to follow the program set forth in Susan Sontag's classic 1964 manifesto, "Against Interpretation." Hellner-Eshed declares that her goal is to portray the Zohar not merely as the "bearer of ideas, but as a work of art in itself" (p. 16), an approach that partakes of the spirit of Profiat Duran. She then quotes the following passage from Sontag:

The aim of all commentary on art now should be to make works of art—and, by analogy, our own experience—more, rather than less, real to us. The function of criticism should be to show how it is what it is, even that it is what it is, rather than to show what it means . . . In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art. (p. 16)¹¹

9. The earliest source I have found for the phrase is in the late midrash *Otiyot de-Rabbi Akiva*, in Shlomoh Wertheimer, *Bate midrashot* (Jerusalem, 1955), 2:375, in a description of the delights reserved for the righteous in paradise.

10. Whatever the complexities of Maimonides' attitude to poetry, he imposed rather exacting standards on it as to content (see Bland, "Medieval Jewish Aesthetics," 540); famously forbade the composition of new prayers of praise to God, *Moreh nevukhim*, I:59; and condemned those who would read the Bible as though it were poetry, *Moreh nevukhim*, I:2. He approved of poetry only insofar as it carried precise ideational content (Bland, "Medieval Jewish Aesthetics," 540) and condemned poetry simply for its own sake (*Perush ha-mishnayot*, Sanh, X:1). He especially condemned those whose principal concerns were the beauty, sound, rhythm, and melody of liturgical poetry; see Joseph Yahalom, "Maimonides and Hebrew Poetry" (Hebrew), *Pe'amim* 81 (1999): 4–5.

11. In the text, rather than translate Hellner-Eshed's translation, I have used the language of Sontag's original essay. Susan Sontag, "Against Interpretation," *Evergreen Review* 8 (1964): 93.

To the probable horror of the likes of Kellner, the “work of art” Hellner-Eshed seeks to make “more real to us,” the Zohar, is replete with angels and demons, bursting with magical encounters and mythological creations—above all, a world in which *sefirot* and *partzufim*, those distinctive “hypostatizations” in which classical Kabbalah abounded, are so part of the spiritual landscape that they need not even be systematically set forth but simply furnish the raw material which the poetic imagination takes as the point of departure for its creations (p. 25). Conflict and harmony among the sefirot and the dramas of the tragic separations and erotic unions of male and female divine personages form the background out of which the Zohar creates its mystical homilies and flights of mythological imagination. It is, indeed, an “enchanted” and enchanting world in which Hellner-Eshed reveals.

And yet, we have not simply returned to the world of “amulets and charms” so scorned by the rationalist. Or, perhaps more precisely, we have returned, but not regressed. The term Sontag uses to describe the goal of art criticism, to render “more real,” is translated by Hellner-Eshed as “more truthful,” (*yoter amiti*)—no doubt an accurate translation, but also one which allows us to measure the distance between the ontological naïveté that Kellner attributes to the zoharic world and the poetic rendering of that world described by Hellner-Eshed. The Sontagian rejection of “hermeneutics” drives a wedge between Hellner-Eshed and Kellner, for the Maimonidian “disenchantment” of the biblical text depends on a systematic hermeneutics purporting to reveal the rational kernel underlying that text’s abundant anthropomorphisms, making its images precisely “less, rather than more, real to us.” Indeed, Hellner-Eshed asserts that it is the Sontagian stance that embodies a greater reflexivity than philosophical hermeneutics, a self-aware belatedness rather than a naïve primitivism. As Sontag argues elsewhere in her essay:

Once upon a time (a time when high art was scarce), it must have been a revolutionary and creative move to interpret works of art. Now it is not . . . Interpretation takes the sensory experience of the work of art for granted, and proceeds from there. This cannot be taken for granted, now . . . All the conditions of modern life—its material plenitude, its sheer crowdedness—conjoin to dull our sensory faculties. And it is in the light of the condition of our senses, our capacities (rather than those of another age), that the task of the critic must be assessed.

What is important now is to recover our senses. We must learn to see more, to hear more, to feel more.¹²

12. Ibid., 80, 93.

Given this diagnosis—that the critical edge of hermeneutics has been negated by the modern condition—one might be tempted to use the label “postmodern” for Hellner-Eshed’s aspiration to write an “erotics” of the Zohar. But there is a deeper reason to avoid that label than the overuse that has long rendered it hopelessly hackneyed. For Hellner-Eshed argues that the Zohar itself produced its “enchantments” not naively but reflexively, that her Sontagian erotics-after-interpretation is not a late twentieth-century invention but one that is true to the creators of her favorite late thirteenth-century text:

As a literary, religious and mystical creation, the Zohar is characterized and distinguished by a powerful reflexivity and poetic artistry. Its heroes . . . characterize, evaluate, and compare it . . . to worldviews and interpretive methods that preceded them, from Scripture to the rationalist philosophers. This . . . self-awareness applies both to their mystical goals and quests and to the very act of the creation of the Zohar as a written composition (p. 24).

In this conception of the Zohar, Hellner-Eshed avowedly follows in the footsteps of her mentor, Yehuda Liebes, who has used the term “renaissance” to describe the Zohar’s self-aware stance in relation to the tradition it seeks to renew.¹³

This self-aware and intertextual nature of the Zohar provides a clear explanation for the focus of her book, expressed in its subtitle, “on the language of mystical experience in the Zohar.” For if mysticism is conventionally conceived as the quest for direct experience, unmediated by context, history, or even language, then the Zohar, marked by the highest level of self-aware intertextuality, poses a puzzle. If Hellner-Eshed is correct, then the Zohar’s mystical effect must be produced not by an aspiration for immediacy but rather by an intimate engagement with a thick texture of mediations. The challenge that Hellner-Eshed thus poses to herself, taking Sontag as her guide, is the following: how does the Zohar *work* as a mystical text, how does it produce its meaning out of the thickly textured heritage in relation to which it situates itself, how can such a self-aware intertextual work yield mystical experience? Again following Liebes, Hellner-Eshed thus devotes herself not primarily to an exposition of the “doctrine of the Zohar” (*mishnat ba-Zohar*)¹⁴ but rather to solving

13. Yehuda Liebes, “The Zohar as Renaissance” (Hebrew), *Daat* 46 (2001): 5–11.

14. See the critique of Isaiah Tishbi’s book *Mishnat ba-Zohar* (Jerusalem, 1949) by Yehuda Liebes in “Zohar and Eros” (Hebrew), *Alpayim* 9 (1994): 89.

the riddle of the working of the “language of mystical experience,” or more generally, of the *text* of mystical experience.

Indeed, the book is largely devoted to analyses of the literary techniques used to face this challenge and to the Zohar’s own reflections on this riddle. Much of the book’s charm is the infectiousness with which Hellner-Eshed shares her delight with the Zohar’s language. This delight is reflected in her insistence on reproducing lengthy passages from the Zohar, both in the original Aramaic and in her own Hebrew translation, in order to give the reader a sense of the aesthetic pleasure offered by the work’s sheer beauty.

But Hellner-Eshed’s central solution to the riddle posed by her description of the Zohar as at once reflexive and mystical lies in her notion of the “passage” or the “leap” from “mystical discourse to mystical experience” (p. 289). She draws this notion from her reading of zoharic texts depicting the “moments of passage from interpretations of verses to an actual mystical experience that the companions are experiencing” (p. 288) in the present. Hellner-Eshed is particularly struck by an example of this “leap” in a passage in the Zohar on the parashah *Aḥare mot*. The passage occurs in the course of the kind of literary unit within the Zohar that Hellner-Eshed, like Liebes, sees as one of its distinguishing features: a long series of homilies by Rashbi’s companions enclosed within an extended narrative frame. This particular kabbalistic novella is quite long, proceeding for over five folios (III:59b–65a) and narrating a number of shifts in dramatic setting. In each setting, several of the companions deliver homilies on related verses, a *mise-en-scène* that Hellner-Eshed compares to serial improvisation by members of a jazz ensemble (p. 231, n. 81).

In such a setting, Hellner-Eshed points to two main features in her chosen passage that create a sense of a “leap” from homiletics to experience. First, she suggests that the succession of homilies itself creates a mounting mystical tension: “Each homily is more ecstatic than its predecessor, and the praises of Rashbi progressively intensify from homily to homily culminating in his apotheosis” (p. 289). The second feature, the “leap” itself, appears as the story nears its climax at the end of the discourse by R. Abba, sometimes identified by the Zohar as its author/transcriber. R. Abba declares

that the gathering [*ma’amad*] in which the companions find themselves **now** [*hashta*] demands a departure from these kinds of homilies and a penetration [*hadira*] into a homiletic level he calls “the secret of wisdom” [*raza de-ḥokhmata*]. Now a passage, a leap, takes place from mys-

tical discourse to mystical experience. At the moment of this passage, R. Abba utters the verse, "And a river goes out from Eden to water the garden," and he interprets it as describing the erotic flow of the divine overflow [*shefa*] from the moment when the preparations for coupling within the divine realm are completed . . . R. Abba does not limit himself to a homily which describes the overflow that descends to the worlds as a result of the coupling of the King and Queen, but rather, calls down the descent of the overflow upon himself and the companions. (p. 289)

In the heat of the mystical situation, the homiletical passes over into the experiential and eventually becomes indistinguishable from it:

The verse from the Song of Songs is read as a visualization of the climax of the erotic tension prior to coupling. In the secret of the distinctive reading that characterizes the Zohar, the "secret of wisdom," it turns into an image of the divine overflow, the river that goes out of Eden, in the moments before it kisses and waters [*yishak ve-yashkeh*] the divine garden, the sefirah of Malkhut, the Queen, as well as the human garden, the consciousness of the kabbalists. (p. 289)

If the beginning of the passage focuses on the flow of the phallic river, its continuation reports the discourse of another companion, R. Elazar, on the activity of the Shekhinah, the sefirah of Malkhut, through the imagery of the "well" in Genesis 29. R. Elazar interprets the passage as portraying the flowing of blessings from the higher realms into the sefirah of Malkhut and the bestowal of blessings by her, in turn, upon the realms both above and below her. This interpretation then becomes a leaping-off point toward the experiential level:

The images of the scriptural verses and the dynamic description of the filling up of the sefirah of Malkhut blend together and become a literal picture, in "real time," of the experience of the company. In other words, the verses signify the actuality of the divine world and, at the same time, they tell of the mystical experience that the companions are experiencing. The correspondence between the words of the Torah with the structure of both the divine and human, point to the structural, and even existential, identity between them . . . The company, like the well, receives blessings from the spring, and the whole generation receives blessings from the company. The river is not the subject of the homily but a description of the experience itself. (p. 293)

Of course, one possible reaction to Hellner-Eshed's portrayal of the "leap" between the homiletical and experiential would be to point out that both are intratextual conceits within a literary work. The so-called real time of mystical experience is a textual narration by the Zohar. One might make two overlapping responses to this kind of observation. First, Hellner-Eshed's concept of the "leap" from homiletics to experience seeks to be not only a description of what occurs within the Zohar's narrative but also a description of what happens when the Zohar works on its reader. In other words, true to her aspiration to follow Sontag's program, Hellner-Eshed provides us with a description of the zoharic effect that is suited to the portrayal of an artwork designed to invite the reader to undergo an experience, rather than a logical argument meant to convince the reader of its soundness. The success of an artwork in producing an experience in us cannot be guaranteed in advance by the strength of its contents but only occurs as an event, a leap from artifact to experience. Just as, in the text of the Zohar, we read the process by which the "homilies which progressively intensify are capable of bringing about ecstatic mystical experience" in the members of the company, so the reader of the Zohar, if the text is successful, will be affected in the same way by the process of reading those very same homilies. It is thus no accident that Hellner-Eshed describes the Zohar as an "invitation," an "offering," with an enduring power to initiate readers throughout the ages into its experiences (p. 18). It is both a phenomenology and a seduction to undergo the phenomenological experience.

Second, Hellner-Eshed teaches us to be attentive to the mystical practices offered by the Zohar, in particular, its suggestion that the "leap" from the interpretive to the mystical level can be produced by contemplation of certain key verses (*pesuke twofen*, lit. "code verses") (p. 268), endowed with the power to produce such leaps. Above all, as her title suggests, Hellner-Eshed tells us that the Zohar views "And a river goes out of Eden . . ." as the most important of such verses, which it repeats countless times and in countless forms. As the Zohar notes (and contrary to the King James translation) the Hebrew verb in the verse is stated in the present tense, "and a river *goes* out of Eden," to suggest that this process is an always ongoing cosmic process. The Zohar also explicitly associates the ongoing flow of the cosmic river as an intradivine process, linking the various sefirot and divine figures, on the one hand, with its dimension as an ongoing flow from the divine to the human, on the other (pp. 283–84, 326–28).

The Zohar describes the utterance of such key verses, when done with the requisite concentration, as a technique to "arouse" the kabbalist to

mystical consciousness, with its suggestive “imagery of the links between the river and the garden, the divine and the human, the male and the female,” awakening awareness of the “wondrousness” of the divine (p. 159). When the Zohar is functioning as a successful artwork, this kind of “arousal,” at once religious and erotic, will be induced in its own readers.

These aspects of the Zohar constitute one more explanation of the premium it places on literary style—for it is a text directed at a reader open to the experience it offers, who approaches the text with “desire and passion,” rather than one who merely seeks its ideational content (p. 205).¹⁵ Of course, this focus on the seductions of the text is likely to draw only impatience from anyone, like Kellner, who insists on clear answers to ontological questions, and who is unlikely simply to acquiesce philosophically to the poetic phenomenology of the “leap.” Indeed, the vexed relations between poetry and ontology, as well as the implicit philosophical underpinnings of the very notion of “experience,” pose challenges that can be deferred, perhaps *must* be deferred due to Sontagian strategies or Derridean aporias, but cannot be simply wished away.

Be that as it may, the Zohar, read in Hellner-Eshed’s way, offers itself as an “alive and extremely relevant invitation to a distinctive religious consciousness, to creativity in the realm of interpretation, culture, and religion,” containing within itself “possibilities to redeem elements of Jewish culture” from “routinization and ossification” (p. 18). And while much of Hellner-Eshed’s book can serve as a guide for any reader of the Zohar, regardless of religious or denominational allegiance, this attention to the liberating dimension of the work takes on a very particular cast when proffered by one “who does not live according to halakha”:

I am aware that this fact hinders me from hearing part of the musical rhythm of the work, but, for me, this is a productive and important “hindrance.” The texts that I read have no authority that could compel me to adopt a particular ideological stance or course of action. In other words, I stand outside the boundaries of the “traditional participant” in this body of knowledge and I am free from submission to the power of its traditional authority. My stance in relation to the text allows me the freedom to sift out the elements with which I identify from the elements which I absolutely reject. (p. 18)

While it is clear, as we have seen, that he is primarily concerned with a very different audience than Hellner-Eshed, it is difficult to know what

15. She quotes the phrase “desire and passion” (*hesbek ve-tesbukah*) from the Zohar commentary of Shimon ibn Lavi, *Ketem paz*, I:210a.

the Kellner of *Maimonides' Confrontation with Mysticism* would make of such a passage.¹⁶ Hellner-Eshed explicitly refuses the uncritical submission to authority, both at the interpretive and social levels, that Kellner attributes to Kabbalah generally. In particular, one can safely assume that the elements she “absolutely rejects” include some of those that would also trouble Kellner, particularly the ontological inferiority some zoharic passages attribute to non-Jews,¹⁷ passages that we could today only describe as essentialist at best, racist at worst.

And yet, one might even argue that it is precisely Hellner-Eshed's relative inattention to the Zohar's dark side that leaves out some of the richest aspects of the work. This “Other Side” includes the sometimes fierce struggle among the sefirot and divine personages, as well as the work's complex mythological discourse about the demonic—and, above all, the difficulties in cleanly and definitively separating the holy and the unholy due to their tangled genealogical relationships and illicit erotic liaisons. This “Other Side” contributes enormously to the Zohar's value and power as a work of art on both the substantive and formal-aesthetic levels. At a substantive level, its discourse on the Other Side is a rich, symptomatic expression of the struggles between eros and aggression, instinctual ambivalence and unconscious defenses, as well as the creation of art and religion through such struggles. The struggle both among the holy dimensions and between them and the demonic, and the thin line between the holy and the unholy dimensions, prefigure and give poetic expression to some of the deepest themes that would later be associated with cultural modernism and psychoanalysis—a link undoubtedly not incidental to Scholem's lifelong fascination with these features of Kabbalah. It also works at a formal-aesthetic level, for the struggle between opposed drives and forces constitutes a creative tension that has often been at the heart of complex and nuanced artistic creations. Indeed, read in this way, the Zohar might itself provide the tools for confronting even its most objectionable passages, which can be subjected to symptomatic critique, rather than to the kind of abstract denunciation that is often simply the prelude for a return of the denounced in another form.

Nonetheless, Hellner-Eshed's reading claims for the interpreter an immense and creative freedom in relation to a privileged text, a stance very

16. But see his *Must a Jew Believe Anything?* 110–26, for a discussion of how an Orthodox Jew can differ respectfully with the non-Orthodox, identified by Kellner as those who adhere to “untruth,” *ibid.*, 125.

17. Hellner-Eshed is, for example, on the board of directors of the “Sulha Peace Project,” a reconciliation project that brings together Israelis and Palestinians, with a strong emphasis on interfaith rituals.

similar to that which she attributes to the one taken by the Zohar itself in relation to the Jewish tradition as a whole. Any such broad claim of interpretive freedom, of course, immediately raises the question of hermeneutic rigor, of the extent to which the creative reading may merely be the subjective projection of the interpreter. In part, the response to this question may be framed in Sontagian terms—a good interpretation, like a work or art, would be one that succeeds in making an experience possible, in this case the experience of another work of art, the Zohar itself. In part, however, this question implicates the entire range of “strong misreadings” of the biblical and rabbinic textual tradition—whether of the philosophical variety, of which the strongest exemplar is Maimonides, or of the kabbalistic variety, of which the Zohar is the strongest exemplar. And nowhere has this problem been taken as a more explicitly and central theme than in late medieval discussions of the realm of the “esoteric,” as demonstrated by Moshe Halbertal in his *Concealment and Revelation: Esotericism in Jewish Thought and its Philosophical Implications*.¹⁸

IV.

It is one of Halbertal's central theses that medieval legitimations of esoteric textual interpretations, putatively directed at preserving secret traditions, paradoxically created a domain over whose contours and content no firm disciplinary control was possible. Any critique based on the subjectivity of esoteric interpretations, indeed, on the absence of any textual reference whatsoever to such secret meanings, could be rejected on the grounds that this was only to be expected, since, after all, these meanings were intended to be kept hidden (p. 40).

Halbertal's monograph is a historical overview of esotericism from the period of the *hekhalot* literature to the early fourteenth century. He traces the many forms to which the fundamental paradox of esoteric writing—the articulation of that which is supposed to remain secret—gave rise in a wide variety of texts during this period. It was in the Middle Ages, Halbertal tells us, that esotericism came to implicate not merely the margins of Jewish religious thought but its very core (p. 39). Halbertal's central argument focuses on the proliferation of metadiscourses *about* esotericism—discourses about the obligation not to engage in discourse—that characterized twelfth- and thirteenth-century writing, those “centuries of concealment and revelation of Jewish creativity” (p. 137).

Halbertal's argument can be read as a critique of any vulgarized form

18. The book was first published in Hebrew as *Concealment and Revelation: Secrecy and its Limits in the Medieval Jewish Tradition* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem, 2001).

of Straussianism focused exclusively on explicating esotericism's compositional strategies and elitist intentions. Such a focus is intrinsically incapable of accounting for the elaborate discourse often found in the writings of esotericists, such as Maimonides, *about* esotericism: why reveal the secret techniques of writing secrets if the intention was to use them to preserve secrecy? Yet, according to Halbertal, this puzzling dimension of much of medieval esotericism is the very key to understanding it—it is, one might say, the “secret of esotericism.” Halbertal argues that the function of the metadiscourse of esotericism was precisely to *convince the reader of the existence of a hidden depth dimension of traditional texts*, to which the self-proclaimed esoteric writer sought to introduce the reader (pp. 66–67). The metadiscourse of esotericism created an empty space that the writer could then fill with some privileged contents absent from the surface of the traditional text. It thus allowed writers to introduce new ideas, theologies, philosophies, and mythologies into Judaism, expanding to practically infinite proportions the “receptive capacity to meaning” (p. 40) of traditional texts. Astrology, Hermeticism, Artistotelianism, Neoplatonism, Gnosticism, as well as other divergent worldviews, were all in this way legitimized, indeed, represented as integral parts of the tradition. This feature of the metadiscourse of esotericism accounts for the similar form it took in streams of thought that were otherwise radically opposed—such as philosophy and Kabbalah (pp. 69–70). If its function was primarily to persuade the reader of the existence of a depth dimension of the text, then the metadiscourse was relatively independent of the *content* of that depth dimension.

It is also this feature which serves as a bridge for Halbertal between medieval scholarship and present-day concerns, and which, no doubt, played a strong motivating role in the writing of this monograph.

Secrecy is the medium that enables integration of different cultural contexts into tradition. Under the cloak of esotericism, radically conflicting positions were integrated into the heart of Judaism. Each of these positions granted totally different significance to the meaning of halakhah and the system of Jewish beliefs. But as long as each side guarded its Torah secrets in secret, the radical multiplicity of competing and conflicting positions could be tolerated. The open and revealed level enabled a co-existence based on mutual respect for secrecy. Within the same congregation and the same synagogue, people who completely rejected each other's views might be found together; but this, on condition that the conflicting sides preserved their esoteric doc-

trines at a proper distance from the revealed side of their worldviews.
(p. 135)

The social and intellectual tolerance thus made possible by esotericism was also conducive to creativity. For Halbertal, the phase of the Middle Ages upon which he is primarily focused was a time of religious crisis, of unease with the *exoteric* meaning of traditional texts. Esotericism facilitated the introduction of external bodies of thought that permitted creative responses to this crisis—while preserving outward social and religious cohesion and ostensible fidelity to the traditional texts (pp. 137–41). Halbertal's argument leads to the provocative conclusion that the demise of esotericism, particularly in our own time, has made Jewish thought much more inflexible and conservative—and, above all, less tolerant of divergent viewpoints. Whatever the plausibility of this description of postmedieval Jewish thought generally, it seems to reflect Halbertal's contemporary concerns.

If Halbertal's description of the function of esotericism, the creation of a space for intercultural engagement and intracultural tolerance, is correct, then the map of medieval Jewish religious life would largely be identical with a map of the esoteric, that land of secret competition between opposed viewpoints discreetly held by those who nevertheless sit together harmoniously in the synagogue. Each would share a common dissatisfaction with the words they all publicly utter, and each would clandestinely bestow new and incompatible meanings on those words in their parallel secret universes.

If this image seems debatable or perhaps only one side of the story, it is because it is only the more overtly normative and implicitly present-oriented side of Halbertal's book, presenting a static and utopian image of the land of the esoteric.¹⁹ The bulk of Halbertal's narrative, by contrast, tells a different story, a dynamic tale of overt and fierce competition between opposed versions of esoteric Judaism. In this story, competing esotericists have more often than not been incapable or unwilling to keep their secrets at an "appropriate distance" but have rather actively or reactively sought to encroach on each other's domains.

A simple example of this dynamic is provided by the phenomenon of esotericists beset by the urge to clarify or to prevent the proliferation of

19. Due to the concerns of this review essay, my discussion of Halbertal focuses on the historical discussion which forms the bulk of the book, and the entirety of the Hebrew edition, rather than on the more general philosophical considerations in the last chapter, "Taxonomy and Paradoxes of Esotericism: Conceptual Conclusion," added to the English edition.

error. Halbertal cites the Ramban's elaborate commentary on the first verse of Genesis, a departure from his usual practice of giving only cryptic allusions to kabbalistic themes (pp. 87–89). Halbertal argues that this can be explained by a polemical drive, specifically, the Ramban's dispute with Ibn Ezra. Where Ibn Ezra sought to fill the esoteric space with "astrological and magical knowledge that elucidates the inner level of the text" (p. 44), others, such as the Ramban, sought to fill it with kabbalistic contents. The need the Ramban felt to combat Ibn Ezra's interpretation led him to embark on an extended kabbalistic disquisition, against his own esotericist scruples. This example, in which competition about the content of the esoteric leads, willy-nilly, to its greater disclosure, is far from isolated in Halbertal's account.²⁰

A more complex example is provided by Halbertal's description of the famous controversy over the study of philosophy that divided the Jews of Provence and Catalonia in the first decade of the fourteenth century, providing examples of both the cooperation and conflict between ideological opponents that esotericism can produce. This controversy was initiated by a strange alliance, between the Maimonidean Abba Mari of Lunel and the kabbalist R. Solomon ibn Adret (Rashba), which brought about the issuance of a decree by the Barcelona community forbidding the study of philosophy under the age of twenty-five (pp. 120–21). The two figures supported the decree for radically different reasons: the Rashba because of his strong opposition to philosophy, Abba Mari because of his desire to protect philosophical Judaism's normativity from the threat posed by public preaching of radical philosophical allegorizations of Scripture. This alliance graphically shows how two rival esotericists could make common cause against those who would encourage the transgression of the "appropriate distance" at which it is necessary to keep secret knowledge. On the other hand, other figures, such as the pro-philosophy R. Menahem ha-Meiri, opposed the alliance due to the Rashba's opposition to philosophy and his kabbalistic allegiances (pp. 129–30).²¹ This controversy, though it came at the end of what for Halbertal

20. Indeed, the mid-thirteenth-century R. Asher ben David even explicitly discussed this dialectic: declaring that it would have been better to say nothing about Kabbalah, not even hints or allusions, R. Asher explains that the heretical versions of Kabbalah publicized by some leaves the true kabbalist with no choice but to explain himself explicitly and clearly (pp. 74–76).

21. Still another form of opposition to the decree came from the antiphilosophy camp, such as R. Asher ben Yechiel (the Rosh), who felt it implicitly legitimated the study of philosophy for those over the age of twenty-five (p. 128).

was the golden era of esotericism, was merely the culmination of the perennially agonistic relationship between competing esotericisms.

Nonetheless, the utopian vision of esotericism offered by Halbertal—the vision of tolerance and openness—is not only compelling on its own terms but seems to be Halbertal’s response to current problems of intolerance and cultural particularism. One can hear unmistakable overtones of nostalgia in Halbertal’s portrayal of his golden age of esotericism. The poignancy of this nostalgia is heightened by his discussion of the variety of obstacles that block any latter-day return to such a golden age. For our purposes, the most interesting of these obstacles is that of the elitism seemingly intrinsic to esotericism—the division of a religious community or of the readers of particular texts between those attuned and those not attuned to hidden meanings. The Enlightenment notion of individual autonomy, and the democratic impulse with which it became associated, consequently delegitimized the esoteric impulse (pp. 140–41).²²

Halbertal, however, presents a critique of this putative modern anti-esotericism. While the Enlightenment and its democratic interpretation dictates an ideal of transparency, the reality of mass politics tells a different story: a reality of the staged performance of transparency, of feigned authenticity, of illusory autonomy. This critique, in fact, brings us back to the Sontagian problematic that inspires Hellner-Eshed, that of finding meaning in a culture “based on excess, on overproduction” of cultural works, whose “result is a steady loss of sharpness in our sensory experience.” Moreover, the dulling of the senses through overload is a phenomenon which has only increased exponentially due to the information revolution of the decades since Sontag wrote, during which we have become only too aware that an excess of openness can itself be a form of concealment. Indeed, Sontag’s solutions of 1964 may themselves no longer be adequate.

V.

If the tension between esotericism and transparency is thus unavoidable, and if a return to the imagined utopia of esotericism in either the Kellner or Halbertal version is impossible, then Hellner-Eshed’s portrayal of the erotics of concealment and revelation in the *Zohar* presents a compelling image for our time. In the *Zohar*, the dialectic between revelation and concealment is no longer simply a question of esotericist writing strategy, as in Maimonides, or a struggle of the writer’s desire to conceal in the face of external pressures to reveal, as in the Ramban, but rather is inter-

22. I would here recall the tension I noted above between Kellner’s Maimonideanism and his Enlightenment stress on individual autonomy.

nalized by the text as one of its overarching metathemes (Hellner-Eshed, p. 198).²³ This internalized tension between revelation and concealment lies at the core of the Zohar's distinctive literary style, indeed may be said to engender that style. In light of Halbertal's notion of the dialectics of esotericism as a vehicle of innovation, the kind of erotic tension between revelation and concealment in the Zohar may thus prove to be a powerful locus for religious creativity, especially in our time of erotic instability and contestation.

The Zohar tells us that the human handling of the relationship between revelation and concealment has the gravest theurgical consequences: "proper revelation induces the holy coupling [between the male and female aspects of the divine], while improper revelation is considered as a sin of sexual transgression" (p. 198), the improper "uncovering of the nakedness" of the divine. Revelation is identified with the bestowal of divine overflow (*shefa*) by the phallic dimension: "the erotic power of this divine dimension, symbolized by the male sexual organ, lies in the protection of the divine overflow, abstinence from wasting it in vain, and the transmission of it in joy to those suited to receive it—the sefirah of Malkhut in the divine world and the righteous and esotericists in this world" (ibid.). On a human level, proper conduct in relation to revelation and concealment is analogous to proper male sexual conduct, that is, abstinence from "spilling seed in vain and the expression of sexuality and its joy with one's sanctified mate" (ibid.). Moreover, improper sexual abstinence is just as culpable as sexual transgression:

The tension between concealment and revelation is that which keeps existence on its foundation. Excessive concealment desiccates existence, surplus revelation shakes its foundations—and therefore neither of these conditions is erotic. True eroticism lies in the play of balancing between the two. (pp. 220–21)

In the Zohar, then, holy union, both above and below, can only take place through the proper deployment of concealment and revelation, which is inextricably related to the proper deployment of sexuality, again both above and below. Thus, the proper deployment of revelation and concealment of mystical truths as a way of ensuring that they fall only into the right ears, and not misused by those for whom they are not intended, contributes to the proper deployment of divine sexuality, uniting the male and female divine personages and preserving them from consorting with their demonic paramours.²⁴

23. Hellner-Eshed cites Yehuda Liebes on this point.

24. On the consorting of the male side with the demonic, see, for example, Zohar III:69a; on the female, see, for example, III:53a.

Yet the standards for what counts as the “proper” deployment of revelation, as Halbertal shows us, as well as those for what counts as the “proper” deployment of sexuality, as the Zohar and recent histories of sexuality tell us, are precarious, never definitively achieved, and always contested: the very term “controversy” (*maḥloket*), the Zohar tells us, designates the primal upsurge of sexual difference and contestation.²⁵ We need only refer to the rich controversies about whether the Zohar should be read as predominantly phallogentric or as rather more expressive of polymorphous sexualities, associated with such writers as Elliot Wolfson, Yehuda Liebes, Charles Mopsik, and Hellner-Eshed herself, to verify both this insight and the productive stimulus to thought this medieval text provides in the specific cultural climate in which we live. Moreover, as both the Zohar and recent thought tell us, these struggles and contestations often do something other than “keep existence on its foundation.” On the contrary, they often lead into the more disturbing regions of the “Other Side,” the side the Zohar richly explores in its excursions into the demonic—an excursion into which Freud was also continually drawn in his investigations into the nether layers of sexuality and the unconscious.²⁶

It is these kinds of excursions, though unemphasized by Hellner-Eshed, that could perhaps help us explore the dark religious phenomena of our age that so trouble our three authors, “haredization,” “fundamentalism,” and “intolerance”—and their tangled and uncanny relations with those aspects of the tradition we might valorize. Indeed, as all three of our authors might proclaim, the tradition provides rich resources for exploring the contested boundaries between male and female, sex and gender, concealment and revelation, eros and aggression, light and dark, poetry and doctrine—an exploration truly available only to those who participate in the tradition’s language but do not simply submit to its authority, who radically innovate through close reading of canonical texts, who reject uncritical celebrations of openness as well as elitist commands to conceal—a truly “mature” Judaism, *as well as* one that delights in its “enchantments”—but also one troubled by its “Other Side.” In short, an exploration for our generation, one which approaches the tradition with that traditional ambivalence to which our predecessors charged us in their age-old phrase: *be-deḥilu u-reḥimu*—with fear and love.

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25. Zohar I:17a–18a.

26. See Luisa de Urtubey, *Freud et le diable* (Paris, 1983).