

Kabbalah and Contemporary Spiritual Revival

edited by

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Building a Sanctuary of the Heart: The Kabbalistic-Pietistic Teachings of Itamar Schwartz

Elliot R. Wolfson

Postmodernism, Perspectivism, and Particularism

The last decades have witnessed a deluge of works dedicated to the exposition of kabbalistic lore. At this moment of history, both faithful practitioners and critical scholars alike are participants in an unprecedented campaign to lift the veils of secrecy that have shrouded the practices and doctrines of Jewish mysticism for centuries, although the hermeneutical presuppositions and the methodological approaches adopted by members of each group to accomplish this end are quite distinct. One of the more prolific teachers actively engaged in this project is Itamar Schwartz, a rabbinic figure from the ultraorthodox community in the Israeli settlement of Kiryat Sefer. The copious lectures of Schwartz have been published anonymously by disciples based on transcriptions of audio recordings¹ under the title *Bilevavi Mishkan Evneh*.² In this study, I will discuss three central themes that figure prominently in this expansive corpus.

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- 1 This fact is recorded on the title page of most of the volumes in this series. Neither date nor place of publication is given but a mailbox in Jerusalem is listed as the address to acquire copies of the book. In subsequent notes, I will list the volume and page number. There is also a website dedicated to Schwartz and the works that record his teaching (in the original Hebrew as well as in French and English translations): <http://www.bilvavi.net>. Interesting, his anonymity is protected even on this site and he is simply referred to by the honorific title *ha-rav*, “the master”.
 - 2 In the final stages of writing this study, I received a copy of Jonathan Garb, “Mystical and Spiritual Discourse in the Contemporary Ashkenazi Haredi Worlds”, *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 9 (2010): 17-36, which includes a section dedicated to some elements of Itamar Schwartz’s thought. I thank the author for sending me his study prior to its publication. Garb offers a brief account of Schwartz’s background in the Lithuanian rabbinic Yeshivot and his subsequent development as an independent thinker who incorporated ideas culled from ethical, pietistic, and kabbalistic works. Garb’s main contribution is taking note of the emphasis that Schwartz places on the interiority of the heart and his ability to offer spiritual guidance attuned to individual psychological needs.

Before proceeding to the textual analysis, let me note that the books that have been published under this title are a unique testament to what I would label a postmodern Kabbalah.³ By using this locution I do not mean to suggest that the author of these teachings embraces the characteristic beliefs typically associated with postmodernity, to wit, ethical relativism, ontological skepticism, and epistemological agnosticism. The preponderance of evidence attests that he uncritically affirms the religious dogma as they have been regurgitated through history by rabbinic authorities, and that his intent in doing so is to inculcate the “simple faith in the heart” (פשיטות האמונה בלב) of every Jew.⁴ A number of passages suggest that Schwartz advocates a closed attitude to the world at large. Thus, in one of the more recently published volumes on the psychological motif of self-knowledge, he insists that all his knowledge is derived from the Torah, which contains everything,⁵ and that he has not studied any of the books of the sages of the Gentile nations.⁶ In light of comments like this there seems little justification to characterize his thinking as postmodern, and yet, I avail myself of the term primarily to designate the eclectic and fragmentary character of this presentation of Jewish mystical doctrine. To be sure, some of Schwartz’s lectures have been organized as commentaries on specific texts (for example, the *Eṣ Ḥayyim* of Ḥayyim Vital, the *Mesillat Yesharim*, *Derekh Ḥayyim*, and *Qela Pithei Hokhmah* of Moses Ḥayyim Luzzatto, the *Pithei She‘arim* of Isaac Ḥaver, the *Sefer Ba‘al Shem*

3 On the notion of “postmodern Kabbalah”, see Boaz Huss, “All You Need is LAV: Madonna and Postmodern Kabbalah”, *Jewish Quarterly Review* 95 (2005): 611-624, esp., 617-624; idem, “The New Age of Kabbalah: Contemporary Kabbalah, the New Age and Postmodern Spirituality”, *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 6 (2007): 107-125, esp., 117-121. The characteristics delineated by Huss under this rubric – eclecticism, commodification, and the valorization of surface over depth – are confirmed by the analysis of Schwartz proffered in this study.

4 Schwartz, *Bilevavi Mishkan Evneh*, 1:64, and compare the affirmation of a literal understanding of creation proffered op. cit., 65-66.

5 This is, of course, a sentiment expressed in much older sources. See, for instance, Mishnah, Avot 5:22.

6 *Da‘ et Ašmekha: Mavo le-Hakkarat Koḥot ha-Nefesh*, 70. Another example of Schwartz’s ultraorthodox orientation is evident in his encouraging others to seek the advice of medical doctors but with the proviso that one should remember at all times that the true agency of healing is the divine. See Schwartz, *Bilevavi Mishkan Evneh*, 4:124-126.

Tov, an anthology of the teachings of Israel ben Eliezer culled from the works of Jacob Joseph of Polonnoye, and the *Rehovot ha-Nahar* of Shalom Sharabi), but in the main he draws freely from a vast array of kabbalistic, moralistic and hasidic texts without attribution and makes no effort to weave his disparate insights into an integrated pattern, opting instead for a worldview that is scattered and random. Although such a multivalent and inter-textual approach is by no means unique to Schwartz, it seems to me that his wide-ranging utilization of material without an attempt to articulate an underlying cohesiveness is reflective of an epistemic perspectivism not attested in precisely the same way in older sources. As I have already intimated, this does not imply that the traditional notion of truth is entirely jettisoned but it is rendered disjointed and thus incapable of taxonomic classification. Consider the following comment: “This is the great principle: we find several aspects in everything; all the aspects are true, but in accord with every vantage point a different aspect is seen. ... The reality is one but the perspective on reality has several aspects”.⁷ In many other passages truths assumed to be categorical are affirmed, especially as they pertain to promoting the twofold goal of drawing close to the divine (קרבת ה') and attaining conjunction (דבקות) or union (אחדות),⁸ which Schwartz proffers as the overriding purpose of human existence, the “point of truth in the heart” (נקודת האמת שבלב).⁹ Schwartz invokes the same notion in a distinction he draws between conjunction (דבקות) as the “inner point” (נקודה פנימית) that “unifies all of the Torah and the commandments” and rote obedience to the law. Commenting on the rabbinic dictum that “even the empty ones amongst you are filled with commandments like a pomegranate”,¹⁰ Schwartz transmits the explanation of David Povarsky (1902-1999), a

7 Schwartz, *Bilevavi Mishkan Evneh*, 10:151. This volume is given the independent title *Qol Demamah Daqqah*.

8 These are the themes explored in the first volume of *Bilevavi Mishkan Evneh* and then repeated in subsequent volumes.

9 Schwartz, *Bilevavi Mishkan Evneh*, 1:64. In that context, the author remarks that the point of truth in the heart can be reached through question and response very much akin to what is known as the Socratic method. The exemplar summoned by Schwartz to elucidate the point is the Passover Seder, the dialogical recounting of the scriptural narrative about the exodus from Egypt.

10 Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 57a.

dean of the Ponevezh Yeshiva:¹¹ “It is possible that a person has many precepts ... but he is still demarcated as empty”. Just as the manifold seeds of the pomegranate are disparate, so the fulfillment of many commandments does not secure a sense of a comprehensive whole.¹² That state of integration, therefore, is not dependent on observance but on the esoteric gnosis imparted quintessentially in the zoharic teaching regarding the threefold unity of God, Torah, and Israel.¹³ Many mistakenly believe that by complying to the ritual precepts they will automatically merit to be conjoined to God. Schwartz insists that this is not sufficient; the matter depends rather on each individual paving a particular path that must be traversed in order to reach the goal of union with the divine. “In the final analysis, every person must choose the clear way that will bring him to the state of conjunction to the blessed holy One, and to request profusely of the blessed holy One that he should merit the way that is suitable and appropriate to him”.¹⁴ Without denying the religious duty to abide by the law, the prime emphasis is placed on the personal road that one must navigate to achieve a state of oneness with and incorporation in the divine, a pietistic ideal also expressed by the supererogatory demand framed in the rabbinic locution that all one’s actions must be for the sake of heaven (וכל מעשיך יהיו לשם שמים).¹⁵ What is left unspoken is the philosophical implications of Schwartz’s position, perhaps because he is not aware of it himself: the state of conjunction overcomes the ontic separation of divine and human that is basic to the theistic conception underlying his own claim that one must request of God guidance to discern the way to this overcoming.

To provide another illustration, Schwartz glosses the directive attributed to Luria¹⁶ that one should study the exoteric meaning (נגליה)

11 I thank Jonathan Garb for helping me identify this reference.

12 Schwartz, *Bilevavi Mishkan Evneh*, 1:34-35.

13 *Zohar* 3:73a. See Elliot R. Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination* (New York, 2005), 245 and reference to other scholars cited on 539 n. 370.

14 Schwartz, *Bilevavi Mishkan Evneh*, 1:36.

15 *Ibid.*, 4:130-131.

16 Luria's disciple, Ḥayyim Vital, reports the daily curriculum of Torah study according to his master in *Sha'ar ha-Miṣvot* (Jerusalem, 1962), 82-83, as noted

of Torah two hours a day and dedicate the rest of the time to the esoteric meaning (נסתר) in the following way:

All of this applies if one is sharp, but if not, all of one's involvement should be with the esoteric and the aggadah. The explanation of these matters: the exoteric is the aspect of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Each person is in accord with the aspect of the Tree of Knowledge that is in his soul, and thus he should be engaged with the Torah that is in the aspect of the Tree of Knowledge, and by means of this he will purify his soul. Hence there is no clear boundary in this, but rather each one according to his soul.¹⁷

Based on a much older correlation, the external meaning of the Torah, which relates to the nomian practices of rabbinic ritual, is associated with the Tree of Knowledge – the duality of good and evil corresponding to the polarity of permissible and forbidden – and we may assume that the internal meaning is linked to the Tree of Life.¹⁸ The one lacking intellectual perspicacity is instructed to be engaged predominantly with esoteric and aggadic matters. While this might seem contrary to commonsense expectation, it is consistent with Schwartz's agenda to disseminate kabbalistic wisdom indiscriminately, an effort that is fueled ultimately by the desire to provide the means for the soul to attain perfection. Accordingly, even exoteric Torah study is valorized as advantageous to the extent that it benefits one's pneumatic achievement. The hermeneutical posture articulated here provides the key to understanding not only the eclecticism of this contemporary kabbalist but also his aphoristic style and the methodical rejection of systematic explanation or even the contextualization of particular insights in larger

and discussed by Lawrence Fine, "The Study of Torah as a Rite of Theurgical Contemplation in Lurianic Kabbalah", in *Approaches to Judaism in Medieval Times*, vol. 3, ed. David R. Blumenthal (Atlanta, 1988), 30-31.

17 Schwartz, *Bilevavi Mishkan Evneh*, 10:161.

18 Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, translated by Ralph Manheim (New York, 1969), 68-69; Isaiah Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar: An Anthology of Texts*, translated by David Goldstein (Oxford, 1989), 1101-1108; Pinchas Giller, *The Enlightened Will Shine: Symbolization and Theurgy in the Later Strata of the Zohar* (Albany, 1993), 60; Elliot R. Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond: Law and Morality in Kabbalistic Mysticism* (Oxford, 2006), 268-273.

conceptual frameworks. Resistance to system in kabbalistic compositions is not unprecedented, indeed it may be considered more generally as part of the rabbinic legacy and the preference for commentary,¹⁹ but in the case of Schwartz something of a peculiarly postmodernist sensibility seems to be at play as well as his refusal to organize his thoughts in a structural pattern, albeit without any conscious awareness or explicit acknowledgement on the part of the author, as we find, by contrast, in the thought of Simeon Gershon Rosenberg, better known as ha-Rav Shagar.²⁰ In the remainder of this essay, I will explore three themes that can contribute to our appreciation of the kabbalistic pietism promulgated by Schwartz.

Before beginning my analysis, let me offer the following disclaimer. I will not trace the ideas reported in Schwartz's name to earlier sources. Based on this measure it is evident that there is little that can be said to be very novel in his teaching. He draws freely and randomly from a plethora of older texts, only occasionally citing a reference or marking his explicit indebtedness. The basic idea that informs his thought – the need for one to come close to and to be conjoined with divinity – is recognizable from previous kabbalistic and hasidic material. My aim in this study is not to provide a roadmap that leads to this man, but to assess the manner in which the threads of these older ideas are woven together to form a different garment bearing the sign of the times. Consistent with my own hermeneutic enunciated in previous studies, novelty and repetition are not polar opposites; newness can be discerned precisely in the iteration. This applies equally to the loyal adept and the critical scholar.

Dissembling and the Rhetoric of Secrecy

Prima facie, it would seem that a corpus like *Bilevavi Mishkan Evneh* presents a direct assault on the esoteric character associated with the

19 Many have touched upon this facet of the rabbinic sensibility, but perhaps none as famously as Gershom Scholem in his study "Revelation and Tradition as Religious Categories in Judaism", in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays in Jewish Spirituality* (New York, 1971), 282-303, esp. 289.

20 Simeon Gershon Rosenberg, *Broken Vessels: Torah and Religious Zionism in the Postmodern Condition*, edited by Odayah Şurieli (Hebrew; Efrat, 2004), 11-55.

classical expressions of Kabbalah from its historical inception in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, not only because of the seemingly unrestrained diffusion of the mysteries but also because of the relatively simplistic rhetorical manner in which this knowledge is delivered.²¹ There are many ways to construe the nature of this secrecy, as is attested by the lack of consensus of scholars who have addressed the issue. I will not here rehearse the details of my previous reflections on this topic but suffice it to say that I have suggested, at times in an overtly Heideggerian manner, that at the core of kabbalistic esotericism is the presumption that a secret cannot be revealed as secret unless it is a secret that is concealed.²² The point was succinctly expressed by Norman O. Brown: “Mysteries display themselves in words only if they can remain concealed”, a characteristic that he associates with the language of poetry.²³ By identifying a principal hermeneutic of the esoteric in kabbalistic thought along these lines does not mean that I am of the view that kabbalists have uniformly affirmed a monolithic perspective on this question or that I subscribe to an essentialist stance.²⁴

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- 21 Consider the approbation of Hizqiah Erlanger included in first volume of *Bilevavi Mishkan Evneh*. “Amongst various books that have been composed, I have found that the book *Bilevavi Mishkan Evneh* can serve as a boon to many, including those of little comprehension, since it is written in a clear, simple, and comprehensible form”.
- 22 Elliot R. Wolfson, “Occultation of the Feminine and the Body of Secrecy in Medieval Kabbalah”, in *Rending the Veil: Concealment and Revelation of Secrets in the History of Religions*, ed. Elliot R. Wolfson (New York and London, 1999), 113-124, revised version in Elliot R. Wolfson, *Luminal Darkness: Imaginal Gleanings From Zoharic Literature* (London, 2007), 259-264; idem, *Abraham Abulafia – Kabbalist and Prophet: Hermeneutics, Theosophy, and Theurgy* (Los Angeles, 2000), 9-93; idem, *Language, Eros, Being*, 10, 16, 26, 128-141, 220-221, 384.
- 23 Norman O. Brown, “Apocalypse: The Place of Mystery in the Life of the Mind”, in *Interpretation: The Poetry of Meaning*, eds. Stanley R. Hopper and David L. Miller (New York, 1967), 9. See idem, *Apocalypse and/or Metamorphosis* (Berkeley, 1991), 3-4.
- 24 This misrepresentation of my work has been promoted chiefly by Moshe Idel in several of his writings. See, for instance, Moshe Idel, *Ben: Sonship and Jewish Mysticism* (New York, 2007), 374 nn. 247-248, 619-620. Idel’s seemingly persistent need to criticize my scholarly vision on this basis fails to understand the dialectical nuances of my thinking. I have repeatedly stressed that it is precisely the preservation of tradition that facilitates innovation; novelty and repetition, in my opinion, are not polar opposites. Uniformity does not preclude multivocality; on the contrary, the former engenders the latter, and hence my

The essence I have identified, contrary to the erroneous and misleading charges that have been leveled against me, precludes an essentialism, since the essence of the secret essentially is to have no essence that could be divulged except as the essence that is hidden. If the secret is delineated as a means to comprehend the incomprehensible, a point I have emphasized time and again, then by definition there cannot be a singular decoding of the secret; heterogeneity is part and parcel of the homogeneity. Moreover, I have readily acknowledged that there is a spectrum in classical kabbalistic literature extending from the conservative pole to one that is innovative. However, as I have also argued,²⁵ this contrast, if treated antinomically, is not a reliable portrayal of the complex hermeneutical interplay that informed the orientation of the kabbalists. Some kabbalists privileged the rhetoric of conservatism to the rhetoric of innovation, but even these kabbalists would have maintained that the extension of the tradition is itself part of the perpetuation of tradition, just as the perpetuation of the tradition is

delineation of essential structures does not mean I subscribe to an essentialism of a monochromatic, pansymbolic, harmonistic, or homogenous nature – these are some of the different pejorative expressions used by Idel to characterize my scholarship – that would level out differences. For fuller discussion and citation of some of the relevant sources, see Elliot R. Wolfson, “Structure, Innovation, and Diremptive Temporality: The Use of Models to Study Continuity and Discontinuity in Kabbalistic Tradition”, *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies* 6 (2007): 143-167, esp. 154-156. In that study, I expressed my view concerning the open system and a polychromatic essentialism by comparing it to Rosenzweig’s notion of system and hermeneutic of diremptive temporality (156-158). Another useful analogue is the cosmological conception offered by process thinkers according to which we can still speak of a coherent world where all things are interrelated even though no underlying unifying principle is affirmed that would minimize the multiplicity of existence. Consider the following account of William James, *A Pluralistic Universe* (Cambridge, MA, 1977), 84: “Our ‘multiverse’ still makes a ‘universe’; for every part, though it may not be in actual or immediate connection, is nevertheless in some possible or mediated connection, with every other part however remote, through the fact that each part hangs together with its very next neighbors in inextricable interfusion. The type of union, it is true, is different here from the monistic type of *all-einheit*. It is not a universal co-implication, or integration of all things *durcheinander*. It is what I call the strung-along type, the type of continuity, contiguity, or concatenation. If you prefer Greek words, you may call it the synechistic type”.

25 Wolfson, “Structure”, 159; idem, “The Anonymous Chapters of the Elderly Master of Secrets: New Evidence for the Early Activity of the Zoharic Circle”, *Kabbalah: Journal for the Study of Jewish Mystical Texts* 19 (2009): 168-172, 181-183.

part of its extension. In the domain of esotericism, it is especially naïve to interpret pronouncements of authorial intent literally – whether they mask originality as replication or tender replication as originality – and not to see them as an integral part of the dissimulation of secrecy. Not only is there a double sense of the secret, as Scholem argued in the introduction to *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*,²⁶ that is, a deeply hidden matter whose transmission is confined to a small élite, but there is duplicity inherent to the very structure of secrecy to which the master of the secret is equally beholden: the secret is concealed in the unconcealment of its concealment, even, indeed especially, for the one to whom it is revealed. Closer to my view, therefore, is the observation made by Scholem in the *Zehn unhistorische Sätze über Kabbalah* that an authentically esoteric tradition must persist as hidden, for if it were to become visible, it would, *ipso facto*, be considered a fallen tradition.²⁷ Intrinsic to the secret is its inability to be exposed but as the secret that cannot be exposed – the more it is exposed, the more it remains hidden.

In a corpus like *Bilevavi Mishkan Evneh*, we seemingly encounter an unconditional propagation of secrets. Let us recall a comment that appears in the very first volume of this series: “The matters with which we are occupied here are not ideas and the like, but the way of life in its simple and straightforward sense, the form of how to live a true life on earth, a life that leads the person to the desired goal. We will try to clarify the matters from the easy to the difficult, step by step, in order that there will be a clear ladder in all that is necessary, so that there will appear before our eyes a clear world of how the way is established to serve Him, blessed be His name”.²⁸ The textual evidence overwhelmingly documents Schwartz’s dedication to publicizing secrets widely, thereby rendering the esoteric exoteric and vulgarizing what was considered for centuries as an aristocratic enterprise inaccessible

26 Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York, 1954), 21.

27 David Biale, “Gershom Scholem’s Ten Unhistorical Aphorisms on Kabbalah”, in *Gershom Scholem*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York, 1987), 103. For further discussion and reference to other scholarly analyses, see Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, 26-27.

28 Schwartz, *Bilevavi Mishkan Evneh*, 1:6.

but to relatively small elitist fraternities.²⁹ And yet, in spite of this attempt at unbridled popularization, which is reflective of a broader trend in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries to disseminate Jewish mystical lore,³⁰ Schwartz on occasion continues to avow the standard language of esotericism. Thus, for example, one passage records his teaching as follows:

In the end, since the substance of the secret is the secret [מהות] [הסוד הוא הסוד], which is hidden [צנוע], it is impossible that there will be a complete disclosure in actuality [גילוי גמור ממש]. Rather, every disclosure is from the perspective of the external aspect that is in it, but from the perspective of the essence of its substance, since its substance is the hidden secret, it is necessary that it remain a hidden secret.³¹

The esoteric nature of the secret is offered elsewhere as an interpretation of the rabbinic dictum³² “When wine goes in, the secret comes out”:

The intention is not that the secret is revealed externally and is thenceforth no longer a secret, for if this were so, then it would be an accidental and not an essential secret, for anything that changes is accidental and not essential. Rather, even though “the secret comes out”, it nevertheless remains a complete secret. The meaning of “the secret comes out” is that even though it is revealed on the outside, the disclosure is naught but concealment, a secret.³³

Schwartz’s argument corroborates the dialectic of concealment and disclosure that I have enunciated in previous publications as endemic to kabbalistic wisdom. This dialectic, I hasten to add, is predicated not on a paradoxical identity of opposites that would efface difference, but

29 My language here is indebted to Brown, “Apocalypse”, 9.

30 Jonathan Garb, *The Chosen Will Become Herds: Studies in Twentieth-Century Kabbalah*, translated by Yaffah Berkovits-Murciano (New Haven and London, 2009), 21-36. The author refers briefly to Schwartz, but he does not engage his thought in detail in this monograph. See, however, the study of Garb referred to above, n. 2.

31 Schwartz, *Bilevavi Mishkan Evneh*, 10:100.

32 Babylonian Talmud, Eruvin 65a, Sanhedrin 38a.

33 Schwartz, *Bilevavi Mishkan Evneh*, 10:150.

on a convergence of opposites in the divergence of their opposition. Schwartz engages this very facet of the dialectic in an aphorism marked “concealment and disclosure – their unity” (העלם וגילוי - אחדותם):

Concealment [העלם]. The concealed [נעלם], hidden root [שורש עלם]. To disclose [גילה], the disclosure [גילוי], exposed root [שורש גל]. [The word] עלם together with [the word] גל is numerically 174 [קעד], including the word itself, [which consists of] the letters עקד. The matter is that from the perspective of the root of the inwardness of the world of the bounded [עולם העקודים], concealment and disclosure are unified and bound with one another. When the matter emanates from its gradation, concealment and disclosure are separated from one another, and it comes to be in the form that disclosure is an entity unto itself and concealment an entity unto itself, until the matter concatenates to the temporal world [עולם הזמן], and there is a time for disclosure and a time for concealment. Above the unity of disclosure and concealment, there is the point of singularity [נקודת היחיד], and this is because the matter of there being disclosure and concealment is when there are at least two, and then it is appropriate for one to be hidden or revealed vis-à-vis the second. However, when there is only singularity, the concept of concealment and disclosure is not relevant.³⁴

In this extract, a fairly conventional philosophical notion is affirmed: at the top of the ontic chain, there is the indifferent unity, the one in which opposites coincide in a manner that exceeds the realm wherein the multiplicity of things are bound together, a realm that is designated by the technical Lurianic terminology, עולם העקודים, which we might translate (in accord with a contemporary idiom) as the world of interconnectivity.³⁵ The supreme unity – the one before the one that is one in virtue of yielding a second – is marked as “the point of singularity”, but there is no point in this unity, since it is indivisible, even though, kabbalistically conceived, the point is geometrically the smallest of figures, a dot, the stroke of the *yod*, whence the line is extended; the

34 Ibid, 10:284-285.

35 Ḥayyim Vītal, *Eṣ Ḥayyim* (Jerusalem, 1963), 6:2, 25b.

incomposite one (יחיד), by contrast, is above divisibility, beyond dimensionality, without the slightest demarcation of difference, and therefore, quite precisely, pointless. In the world of interconnectivity, concealed and disclosed are likewise unified but still distinguishable; in the singular one, they are truly indistinguishable. On the lower plane of being/consciousness, the temporal world, the disparity is clearly operative, and the time for the one is not the time for the other. Even in this domain, however, the enlightened mind knows that every disclosure is perforce a concealment, that what is revealed is the concealed and as such it must be concealed in order to be revealed.

What does this dialectic concretely mean for Schwartz? Are the articulations thereof merely empty rhetoric or is there still some substance to them? It is fairly obvious that Schwartz is voicing a hermeneutical tenet rather than offering a sociological or anthropological judgment. We may reasonably conjecture, moreover, that what he wishes to convey to his audience is that they should not think he is capable of divulging the full extent of the secret in spite of his own desire to accomplish precisely such a feat. It is the nature of the secret that it must be withheld in its communication; indeed, the very communication occasions the withholding. The concerted effort to broadcast the mysteries of Kabbalah does not invalidate this truism. I have no reason to doubt Schwartz's sincerity when he proclaims that it is impossible for there to be a complete disclosure of the secret. To me, this is not a smokescreen to hide the fact that the matter claimed to be hidden is in fact utterly disclosed. Quite the contrary, it is a task for the recipient of his teaching – whether obtained orally or in writing – to ponder how his commitment to the dialectic of esotericism is still meaningful, for only by doing so will the disciple be able to imbibe the humility that is necessary to accomplish the state of annihilation vis-à-vis the master. By the gesture of self-eradication the student is elevated to the pneumatic gradation of the teacher, which corresponds symbolically to the aspect of Moses, a level of knowing – or, to be more precise, unknowing – that is higher than that of the angels.³⁶ We may adduce, moreover, that the relationship of the disciple to the master is on a par with the

36 Schwartz, *Bilevavi Mishkan Evneh*, 5:327-328. The rabbinic passage that serves as the basis for this aphorism appears in Babylonian Talmud, Mo'ed Qaṭan 17a.

purity of heart achieved by a person bound through worship to the divine.³⁷

Hypernomian Transvaluation and the Disfiguration of the Divine Image

But what is the nature of that worship? *Prima facie*, we might be tempted to associate it with prayer, which is, traditionally, identified as the true worship of the heart, and there are indeed many passages that would support such an interpretation. However, there are also passages whence a different possibility emerges, one in which the quietistic ideal of worship through nullification (עבודת הביטול) – the abrogation of carnal desires, which are deceitful, and the affirmation of the divine will, which is truthful³⁸ – is presented in terms that have affinity with the attitude I have labeled in previous studies as *hypernomian*.³⁹ A striking instance of this tendency is found in Schwartz’s explication of the talmudic description of a scholar who knows that something is prohibited but he “erred in the [interpretation of the] commandment to heed the words of the sages”,⁴⁰ and the gloss of the eleventh-century commentator, Solomon ben Isaac (Rashi) “even to do something forbidden”:

We must comprehend the root of the error according to the inner meaning such that we would presume that one must heed the sages even against the holy Torah, for [it is written] in the *Tiqqunim* from *Zohar Ḥadash* (89c),⁴¹ “It says ‘in the beginning,’

37 Schwartz, *Bilevavi Mishkan Evneh*, 5:140.

38 Ibid, 3:24-25. This volume is also given the title *Sullam shel ‘Aliyyah*.

39 Elliot R. Wolfson, “Mystical Rationalization of the Commandments in the Prophetic Kabbalah of Abraham Abulafia”, in *Perspectives on Jewish Thought and Mysticism*, eds. Alfred Ivry, Allan Arkush, and Elliot R. Wolfson (Reading, 1998), 345-359; idem, “Beyond Good and Evil: Hypernomianism, Transmorality, and Kabbalistic Ethics”, in *Crossing Boundaries: Ethics, Antinomianism and the History of Mysticism*, eds. Jeffrey J. Kripal and William Barnard (New York and London, 2002), 103-156. Greatly revised versions of these studies appear respectively in Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, 204-228, and *Venturing Beyond*, 186-285. For my most recent discussion, see Elliot R. Wolfson, *Open Secret: Postmessianic Messianism and the Mystical Revision of Menahem Mendel Schneerson* (New York, 2009), 55-58, 161-199.

40 Babylonian Talmud, Horayot 2b.

41 The reference is to the Amsterdam edition of *Zohar Ḥadash* (1702).

and [the connotation of] ‘beginning’ is naught but the Torah,⁴² and [the connotation of] ‘beginning’ is naught but the soul,⁴³ and the Torah is inferior to the soul”. The explanation of the GR”A there is that “the Torah is in [the world of] creation, and thus there is in it reward and punishment, the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, and the soul is from the [world of] emanation”.⁴⁴ Hence the soul of Israel is above the Torah, and, consequently, we would presume that one must heed the words of the sages even to do something forbidden, which is the nullification of the aspect of the Torah. But, in truth, there is also a Torah of emanation, as it is written in the introduction to the *Tiqqunei Zohar*, “there is a Torah of creation and a Torah of emanation”.⁴⁵

Utilizing the earlier zoharic passages and the explanation of Elijah ben Solomon, the Gaon of Vilna, Schwartz affirms that the soul is superior to the Torah, just as the realm of emanation is higher than the realm of creation, and thus it may be possible to do something that would nullify the law. The distinction at the end between the Torah of emanation and the Torah of creation does not alter the point substantially, since the former is above the dichotomy of permissible and forbidden, the Torah of the Tree of Life as opposed to the Torah of the Tree of Knowledge, the law that is above the law.

The hypernomian idea is enunciated in a second passage. Commenting on the talmudic directive that on Purim one must be inebriated to the point of not knowing the difference between “cursed is Haman” (ארור המן) and “blessed is Mordecai” (ברוך מרדכי),⁴⁶ Schwartz remarked:

For the two of them are equal numerologically (502) ... and from the perspective of the inner depth, the point that is above “you have chosen us” is revealed. “A person is obligated to be

42 *Genesis Rabbah*, eds. Julius Theodor and Chanoch Albeck (Jerusalem, 1965), 1:1, 2.

43 *Tiqqunei Zohar*, ed. Reuven Margalio (Jerusalem, 1978), sec. 67, 98b.

44 *Tiqqunei Zohar ‘im Tiqqunim me-Zohar Ḥadash ‘im Be’urei ha-GR”A* (Vilna, 1867), 49b.

45 Schwartz, *Bilevavi Mishkan Evneh*, 10:161.

46 Babylonian Talmud, Megillah 7b.

inebriated on Purim until one does not know”. The essence of the day of Purim brings one to the inner comprehension of “until one does not know”. When a person begins the worship, he starts it, as it were, during the course of Nisan, the course of Passover. It takes 12 months [in a leap year, 13 months] until he reaches the course of the disclosure of Purim. From this perspective, a person begins his worship from the comprehension that there is worship, until he reaches the end of the festivals, and the point that is above worship is revealed to him – the conjunction to Him, blessed be He, the walking beyond the root.⁴⁷

Purim is the culmination of the path of ritual, as it signifies conjunction (התדבקות) with the divine, which is the “point above worship” (נקודה), the “walking beyond the root” (הליכה אחר השורש) (שלמעלה מן העבודה), a notion that is alternately expressed as the dyad of the externality (חיצוניות) and internality (פנימיות) of the commandments, the former related to the performance of the ceremonial rites and the latter to their ultimate goal, which is the tangible – but at the same time non-physical⁴⁸ – drawing close to God in the heart (קרבת ה' מוחשית ממש בלב), the teleological ideal encapsulated in the title *Bilevavi Mishkan Evneh*.⁴⁹ Not only does this walking (הליכה) supersede the ritual law (הלכה), but it dissolves the distinction between Jew and non-Jew and thus problematizes Israel's claim to being God's chosen people. As might be expected, the author recoils from the full implications of his own thinking by invoking the depiction of the ten *sefirot* in the first part of *Sefer Yesirah*, “their end is fixed in their beginning”, to anchor the idea that after Purim the cycle starts all over again. While the strategy of this move is understandable, and indeed embraces a conception of time as both linear and circular, a view that resonates with my own understanding of the kabbalistic perspective,⁵⁰ it does not deal adequately with the hypernomian dimension of Jewish messianic speculation. If, as the

47 Schwartz, *Bilevavi Mishkan Evneh: Mo'adim*, 209.

48 Ibid, 1:24.

49 Ibid, 1:17, 20.

50 Elliot R. Wolfson, *Alef, Mem, Tau: Kabbalistic Musings on Time, Truth, and Death* (Berkeley, 2006), 55-117.

author claims, the point of the ritual cycle is to move from the necessity of worship, and the implied chosenness of the Jewish people, to the state that exceeds worship, in which the ethnic boundaries are blurred, why should one have to undergo the process again? Why is there no allowance for a final liberation from the cycle? And, if there is no such allowance, how is the return to the cycle enhanced by imagining the possibility of extending beyond it?

From other comments in the *Bilevavi Mishkan Evneh* we may assume that, like many thinkers who have preceded him, Schwartz postpones the full force of the hypernomian ideal to the messianic epoch. To illustrate the point I will refer to an extended discussion in Schwartz's commentary on Luzzatto's *Derekh ha-Shem* based on the distinction between the period of the six millennia as the "time of worship" (זמן (העבודה) in which there is a mixture of good and evil and the future as a "time of receiving the reward" (זמן קיבול השכר) in which there is only good, the "day that is entirely Sabbath" (יום שכולו שבת) or the "world that is entirely good" (עולם שכולו טוב). Schwartz is quick to point out that the Sabbath observed in the course of history prior to the eschaton is a mode of repose (מנוחה) that is a foretaste of the end.⁵¹ However, there is a fundamental shift that distinguishes the present from the future: the worship of God in this world is based on volition (בחירה)⁵² but the gnosis (ידיעה) in the world of truth (or the world of recompense in the afterlife) precludes all worship. Insofar as the duality is overcome in the future there is no more need for worship "whose concern is the augmentation of the force of good and the obliteration of the force of evil". The eschaton is described in nondual terms as the "light of the conjunction with the Creator" (אור של דבקות בבורא).⁵³

Based on a well-attested wordplay of העולם and העולם,⁵⁴ Schwartz notes that there is a mode of concealment intrinsic to both this world and the world-to-come. The form of devotion apposite to the former,

51 Schwartz, *Sefer Derekh ha-Shem 'im Be'ur mi-Ba'al Meḥabber Sifrei Bilevavi Mishkan Evneh*, 136-138.

52 For an extended discussion of the notion of choice, worship, and the purpose of human existence, see *ibid.*, 128-140.

53 *Ibid.*, 137.

54 See Wolfson, *Open Secret*, 103-114.

in which the light of the infinite is concealed, is predicated on a presumption of an independent will and a volitional deity; the concealment of the latter is the fact that the reward consists of the revelation of that light wherein the ontic division between the soul and the divine is abolished and the sense of an autonomous will completely eradicated in the “conjunction to the creator” (התדבקות בבורא).⁵⁵ It is, however, possible for a person to acquire a modicum of this knowledge in the spatio-temporal world but only in proximity to the coming of the messiah. In the messianic epoch, “the light of the nullification of volition will be revealed, and there will be a disclosure of gnosis; there will be in this time disclosures without any vessel by which to worship, and the root of these disclosures is from the world of the messianic days and not from the world of worship”.⁵⁶ The statutory prayers necessitate an anthropomorphic conception of the deity, epitomized in the belief that God controls every minute detail of an individual’s life.⁵⁷ But the one who knows the secret is cognizant of the fact that the dialogical framing of prayer, addressing God in the second person, is superseded by the realization that the divine is innately hidden and concealed, the incomprehensible infinity.⁵⁸ The true aim of prayer, therefore, is to foster the state of conjunction that would cast the depiction and role of the imaginative faculty in a different light. The mandate is for the human to become divine rather than making the divine human. In Schwartz’s own words: “The light of the imagination is the most elevated and it is rooted in *Keter* ... and this is the aspect of the human, who is called *adam* from the phrase ‘I will be likened to the most high’ [אדמה לעליון] (Isa 14:14), the aspect of the imagination [דמיון], for this is his entire worship, to conjoin himself to the imagination that is above the grasp of created being and, as it were, to become comparable to the blessed holy One, אדמה לעליון”.⁵⁹ From the standpoint of the mystical ideal of integration (התכללות), there is a unity between the soul and God to the point that it no longer makes sense to speak of

55 Schwartz, *Sefer Derekh ha-Shem*, 148.

56 Schwartz, *Bilevavi Mishkan Evneh*, 5:326-327.

57 Ibid, 2:113-114.

58 Ibid, 2:121, 124.

59 Ibid, 10:119.

prayer dialogically.⁶⁰ The pinnacle of the pneumatic ascent is to reach the attribute of *Keter*, which is beyond the imagination, since it is the divine nothing and hence it is divested of all images, even the image of imagelessness. Concerning this all one can say is that it is nothing that one could say. Paradoxically, the greatest achievement of the imagination – what makes the human divine – is the apophatic renunciation of the imagination. What is configured in the end is the disfiguration that is fully envisioned in the tranquility of the great Sabbath, represented kabbalistically as the silent womb of the supernal Mother.⁶¹

Redemption and the Atemporality of Messianic Expectation

Commenting on the rabbinic idea that the messiah comes when one is unaware, literally, when knowledge is removed, בהסח הדעת,⁶² Schwartz remarked that redemption is the aspect of “the point of the nullification of time” (נקודת ביטול הזמן), and this is the key to understanding the obligation for every Jew to say (according to the twelfth of the thirteen principles of faith formulated by Maimonides) “I will wait for him” (אחכה לו), that is, “all of the worship is the nullification of time, and not only according to its plain sense, that the messiah tallies because of transgressions ... but he tallies and we wait for him, and this is the whole secret of redemption. The nullification of time and the integration – this essentially brings the messiah, and nullifies the time from itself. For the perpetual will, which is in opposition to the flux of time, is in essence the nullification of time. Thus our waiting and his not coming, again is the essence of the secret of redemption and the nullification of the point of time. We want the time but the time is not found, this is the essence of receiving the distinction that there is no time. From the

60 Ibid, 5:235. For an elaboration of this theme as it emerges from Ḥabad sources, see Wolfson, *Open Secret*, 145-146.

61 Elliot R. Wolfson, “Murmuring Secrets: Eroticism and Esotericism in Medieval Kabbalah”, in *Hidden Intercourse: Eros and Sexuality in the History of Western Esotericism*, eds. Wooster J. Hanegraaff and Jeffrey J. Kripal (Leiden, 2008), 65-109, esp. 91-104.

62 Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 97a.

perspective of time, the messiah cannot come because his entire being is that there is no time”.⁶³

Exoterically, it is the mandate for the Jew to wait for the temporal coming of the messiah, but esoterically, the waiting signifies that this can never transpire in time. Indeed, the secret of redemption (סוד הגאולה) portends the *nullification of time* (ביטול של הזמן), the epochal showing that is outside the cycle of the six millennia. The gesture of waiting is thus tied to the intrinsic atemporality of the eschaton or what I have elsewhere called the advent of the (non) event.⁶⁴ It is inevitable that the savior cannot come in time because *his entire being is that there is no time* (כי כל המהות שלו היא שאין זמן). Alternatively expressed, the messiah corresponds to the state of mystical integration or absorption (התכללות) into the aspect of the divine that is above differentiation. When viewed from this vantage point, the waiting itself is the fulfillment of the expectation, for waiting is an activity that uniquely allows one to linger in the interval in which time is suspended. This is the mystical import of the rabbinic tradition that the festivals will be abrogated in the messianic era,⁶⁵ since they are based on the temporal cycle, when the latter is nullified, then the holidays, too, will be nullified. The midrashic explication of the dream of Jacob (Gen 28) is invoked to substantiate the claim that “the end of the exiles is not in the progression

63 Schwartz, *Sefer Ba'al Shem Tov 'im Perush Mishkan Bilevavi Evneh*, 1:240-241.

64 Wolfson, *Open Secret*, 265-300. In that context, I analyzed a number of thinkers but neglected to mention this important passage in Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln, 1986), 141-142: “Jewish messianic thought (according to certain commentators), suggests the relation between the event and its nonoccurrence. ... Both future and past (it is said at least once that the Messiah has already come), his coming does not correspond to any presence at all. ... And if it happens that to the question ‘When will you come’ the Messiah answers, ‘Today’, the answer is certainly impressive: so, it is today! It is now and always now. There is no need to wait, although to wait is an obligation. And when is it now? When is the now which does not belong to ordinary time, which necessarily overturns it, does not maintain but destabilizes it? When? – especially if one remembers that this ‘now’ which belongs to no text, but is the now of a severe, fictitious narrative, refers to texts that make it once more dependent upon realizable-unrealizable conditions”.

65 *Midrash Mishle*, ed. Burton L. Visotzky (New York, 1990), chapter 9, 66. To be precise, the dictum transmitted in that source proclaims that all festivals with the exception of Purim will be abrogated in the future. According to R. Eleazar, neither will Yom Kippurim be abrogated. See Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia, 1968), 6:48, n. 194.

of time, but it is the point that cannot be enumerated, and in which there is no time. This is the point that cannot be comprehended, and this is the secret of redemption, the secret of the incomprehensible nothing [סוד האיין הלא מושג], for every comprehension is in the enumeration, and one of the forms of enumeration is time, and hence it is necessary for there to be an abrogation of time [ביטול הזמן]. In the final analysis, the secret of creation is the secret of comprehension and enumeration, and the nullification of the enumeration is the secret of conjunction and integration [סוד הדבקות וההתכללות] in [the one about whom it is said] ‘there is none but Him’ (Deut 4:35).⁶⁶ Messianic redemption consists of the discernment that there is nothing but godliness, a discernment that entails the annihilation of the independent status of the world as well as of the theistic conception of a deity. This realization ensues from the conjunction of the self with the nothing that cannot be apprehended, the atemporal beginning that is the end, which occasions the abrogation of time.

As Schwartz notes elsewhere, the essence of time is the tarrying in the soul or in the object and turning it from something to nothing – the example given to illustrate the point is the lack of patience one shows when one wants something.⁶⁷ If one’s desire is aimed at nothing, then there is no tension or impatience, since the deferral only augments the nothing. This secret is elicited from the scriptural narrative about Jacob’s waiting to betroth Rachel (Gen 29:2): the seven years passed like a few days on account of his love for her, that is, his desire was to conjoin with her to abrogate his self, to become nothing, and therefore the postponement seemed to take no time at all. The waiting itself is part of the acquisition of the nothing (קנין האיין) facilitated by Rachel – a curious expression, *acquisition of nothing*, as there can be nothing to obtain. The essence of time is understood precisely in terms of such an acquisition, “the nullification of the moment that transforms the something into nothing” (ביטול של העת שהופך יש לאין).⁶⁸ Schwartz relates this conception to the rabbinic maxim (transmitted in the name of Qatīna) that the world exists for six millennia followed by a seventh

66 Schwartz, *Sefer Ba'al Shem Tov*, 1:241.

67 Schwartz, *Bilevavi Mishkan Evneh*, 10:65.

68 Ibid, 66.

millennium of desolation (חרוב).⁶⁹ The prospect of the cosmic sabbatical reveals within the temporal span of the six millennia the “light of nothing” (אור של אין), and through this power “time is consumed from something to nothing” (מתכלה הזמן מיש לאין). The power of the nothing is the “point of the negation of time” (נקודת האין של הזמן) through which opposites coalesce, the void in which the something reverts to the nothing whence it emerged. The secret is further linked to the aggadic tradition that on Tisha be-Av, the fast day commemorating the destruction of the two Jerusalem temples, the messiah was born,⁷⁰ “for he is the complete nothing (אין הגמור). On this day, which is time when it is most detached, in order to sweeten it, it must be elevated to the complete nothing. And this is the illumination of the messiah, the complete nothing”. This, too, is the mystical import of waiting for the messiah: in order to arrive at the absolute nothing, it is necessary to pass through all the aspects of time. The liturgical locution “to sanctify Israel and the times” (מקדש ישראל והזמנים), therefore, signifies that Jews consecrate time by exalting it so that it is incorporated in infinity (התכללות באין סוף), a task assigned exclusively to the people of Israel for they are rooted in the nothing (מושרשים באין).⁷¹ The comportment of time (זמן) is related philologically to the expression that denotes the act of being summoned (לישון מזומן), an act that necessarily is instantiated in a propitious moment (עת) excluding all other moments. Time, in other words, is always what occurs now but what occurs now can never be calibrated as a magnitude of time. The summoning, accordingly, is related to what Schwartz demarcates as the “preparation of nothing” (זימון של אין), which facilitates the individual’s “being annihilated like the nothing” (בטל כאין). In this space of nothing, which is time’s true measure, one is “prepared for everything” (מזומן לכל).⁷²

Let me conclude by conceding that I am not certain Schwartz is cognizant of the radical implications of his speculation on the messianic ideal as I have extracted it from some of the volumes of *Bilevavi Mishkan Evneh*. Whatever his intent, however, it is legitimate for one

69 Babylonian Talmud, Rosh Hashanah 31a, Sanhedrin 97a.

70 Palestinian Talmud, Berakhot 2:3, 5a.

71 Schwartz, *Bilevavi Mishkan Evneh*, 10:67.

72 Ibid, 68.

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to draw these implications. Staying within the confines of traditional orthodoxy, this contemporary teacher has nonetheless ventured beyond those parameters in a manner consistent with many of the kabbalistic and hasidic sources that have influenced him. In spite of the considerable disclosure of what was previously considered to be secretive wisdom, he upholds the commitment to the notion that something of the secret is withheld. I have surmised that this is meant to instill in the listener the modesty commensurate with the ideal of self-obliteration, an ideal constituting both the teleological aim of commitment to the ritual precepts of the Torah and the target exceeding that commitment. This world, ruled by the distinction between permissible and forbidden, is a vestibule to the world-to-come, a world that surpasses this duality, a world of pure light in which the conjunction to the infinite is consummated. In this state, one advances beyond the figural depiction of the divine because there is no more need for the pretense that there is a self standing over and against the other. To realize this annihilation is to live messianically in the moment that cannot occur in the temporal flow of the world but which nonetheless is the very condition accounting for the continuity of time in the world.