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'Sage is preferable to prophet': revisioning midrashic imagination

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REVELATION INTERPRETED: TEMPORAL CLOSING OF ETERNAL ABYSS

In the essay 'From Scribalism to Rabbinism: Perspectives on the Emergence of Classical Judaism', Michael Fishbane astutely observed that the transition from 'ancient Israel' to the onset of 'ancient Judaism' is a religious history marked by an 'axial' shift 'from a culture based on direct divine revelations to one based on their study and reinterpretation. The principal custodians of the former were the sage-scribes of ancient Israel; the purveyors of the latter, the sage-scholars of early Judaism.'[1] Many texts lend support to the claim that the authoritative role accorded the oracular prophet was transferred to the scriptural commentator.[2] Fishbane's work, however, also raises the prospect that this transition should not be understood in a strictly evolutionary way, at least not one that traverses a unilateral trajectory. For instance, mantological materials incorporated in the biblical canon—dreams, visions, and omens—were not devoid of an interpretative dimension, nor was the practice of textual interpretation (executed by prophets, scribes, or sages) without a revelatory component. One can speak, therefore, of 'inspired exegesis', a form of 'exegetical illumination'.[3] The emphasis on interpretation may have been a cultural *novum*, but as Fishbane reminds us, the sage, if properly pious, harbors a hope 'to receive exegetical revelations (*yigleh*) from God . . . Thus, complementing the divine revelation now embodied in a written Torah, the sage seeks from God the grace of an *ongoing revelation* through the words of Scripture itself—as mediated *through exegesis*.'[4] The 'spiritual sensibilities' of the sages, accordingly, display the 'transformative powers of devoted study. For them, God's manifold grace flows to those sincerely occupied with Torah—who study it without precondition or presumption . . . It is therefore quite likely that this profound religious experience, *of transcendence in and through study*, is also a

moment of mystical illumination.'[5] Noteworthy is the use of the term 'mystical' to characterize the rabbinic ideal of scholastic piety, illumination through study. The arc extending from scribalism to rabbinism was 'complete', Fishbane contends, when the sages no longer knew themselves to be merely 'custodians of the letters of Scripture', but rather 'faithful students of divine truths—truths which may burst forth anew from their Source, like a well of living waters[6] . . . In such hope, the profound abyss between Revelation and Interpretation may be obscured—or transcended.'[7]

The obscuring of the chasm between revelation and interpretation holds the key to unlock the doors of midrashic imagination,[8] as the latter, through the vagaries of time, works out in detail the 'hermeneutical core of Judaism', the 'identification of God's utterance and Torah', an identification that is rooted in the belief that the written Torah itself is an 'extension of divine speech—and not merely its inscriptional trace'.[9] As the extension of divine speech, the text revealed at Sinai, whether we construe this in the most limited sense as the Decalogue or in the most expansive sense as the whole of Torah, 'is accompanied by a prolepsis or encapsulation of the future achievement of rabbinic interpretation. The written text thus mediates between the original verbal revelation of God at Sinai and the ongoing discourses of the sages in history.'[10] The interpretive promise of revelation opens the possibility of accessing the revelatory capability of interpretation. The path reaches a crescendo of sorts in the medieval kabbalistic sources from which one may deduce that 'mystical hermeneuts . . . even made the audacious claim that the historical Torah given at Sinai is nothing less than a reflex of inscriptions on the divine cosmic body, as it were, so that a proper penetration of the veils of Scripture will lead to an ecstatic vision of the cosmic form of God, who is actually formed out of Scriptural language—a kind of hieroglyphic hologram!'[11]

In support of this view, one might note the preservation of pericopae in the vast corpus known as rabbinic literature wherein the illuminative nature of Torah study is emphasized and the countenance of the sage is described as shining with the brightness of the celestial lights, tropes that are meant to convey, metaphorically, that one has been transfigured, perhaps even angelified, in a manner that recalls the aggadic understanding of the transmogrification of the Israelites at Sinai (*p. Shabbat* 8:1, 11a; *Pirqei Rabbi Eli'ezer* 2).[12] From still other passages, it may be demonstrated that the scholastic ideal promulgated by rabbinic sages did indeed presume that the event of revelation is continuous—in every moment the text is interpreted, there is the possibility of experiencing the original revelation, which was itself already a matter of interpretation.[13] The ritual of *talmud torah*, therefore, affords one the possibility of reliving the Sinaitic epiphany, an idea that is derived from, or hyper-literally linked to, the words 'On this day they came to the desert of

Sinai' (Exod 19:1)—that is, 'on this day' (*ba-yom ha-zeh*), and not merely 'on that day' (*ba-yom ha-hu*), to indicate that it is incumbent on future readers to look upon the Torah as if it were given afresh each time it is studied.[14] Through proper intentionality, which, in my estimation, should be understood in the rabbinic context as a notional equivalent to the inner time consciousness of Husserlian phenomenology, every present can become a replication of the past that induces the disruption of the future, the coming-to-be of what has always never been but the having-been of what is always yet to come.[15] We may conclude, then, that in the spectrum of opinions expressed by the rabbis, there was a view that did not look upon the revelatory and hermeneutical modalities as oppositional. We may assume further that some of the sages conceived of their own textual praxis as a form of inspired exegesis.

PROPHETIC INSPIRATION AND TEXTUAL STUDY

A striking example of this orientation is the pronouncement transmitted in the name of Ameimar, a fifth-century Babylonian amora, *ḥakham adif mi-navi*, 'the sage is preferable to the prophet' (*b. Baba Batra* 12a).[16] It does not tax the imagination to conjecture why a rabbinic scholar would have uttered such a statement, but given the historical prominence of the institution of prophecy in the collective memory of the Israelite past, it remains valid to ask in what exact way the sage was thought to be more worthy than the prophet. Let us consider the literary context wherein the dictum appears. Redactionally, the teaching of Ameimar is set in a pericope initiated by a comment attributed to the third-century Palestinian amora, Avdimi of Haifa: 'From the day the temple was destroyed, prophecy was taken from the prophets (*nevi'im*) and given to the sages (*ḥakhamim*).' The anonymous redactor interposes the rhetorical query: 'Is it not the case that a sage (*ḥakham*) is a prophet (*navi*)? Thus, it is said, even though it is taken from the prophets, it is not taken from the sages.' At this point the teaching of Ameimar is recorded: 'The sage is preferable to the prophet, as it says, "and the prophet [who is] wise of heart" (Ps 90:12). Who is dependent upon whom? I would say the lesser one is dependent on the greater.' Ameimar's exegetical proof rests on an intentional misreading of the masoretic text, *we-navi levav ḥohkmah*, part of the psalmist's appeal to God, *limnot yamenu ken hoda we-navi levav ḥokhmah*, 'Instruct us to number our days that we might gain wisdom of the heart' (Ps 90:12). Ameimar reads *we-navi* (*waw-nun-bet-alef*), 'and we might gain',[17] as *we-navi* (*waw-nun-bet-yod-alef*), 'and the prophet', a textual change—and not simply eisegesis masked as exegesis—that lends support to his claim that the sage is more worthy than the prophet.[18]

Commenting on the initial statement of Avdimi, Ephraim E. Urbach remarked, 'apparently, by "prophecy" he meant a mystic experience, which could be acquired only by one who was also a Sage. The Sage could also be a prophet, but one who professes to be only a prophet, is not even a prophet. This is what Ameimar had in mind when he said "a Sage transcends a prophet".'[19] Urbach conjectures further that the 'underlying view' of this adage may be gleaned from another passage attributed to the fourth-century amora Tanḥum ben Ḥiyya, wherein the prophet and sage are compared figuratively to two agents (*semanterion*) sent by the king to a province. The former must present a sign or miracle to prove the legitimacy of his mission (Deut 13:2), whereas the latter needs no sign but only the ability to instruct others concerning the royal interdictions (Deut 17:11; *p. Avodah Zarah* 2:8, 41c).[20] By juxtaposing the two dicta, Urbach draws the conclusion that the intent of the parables is to insist on the supremacy of rabbinic authority: elucidation of the laws through textual study supersedes acts of prophetic wonder-making and prognostication as the vehicle by which the injunctions of God are made known to the people of Israel.[21]

It is entirely possible that both rabbinic statements are polemical in nature, aimed at undermining those who would place the ultimate source of religious power in the hands of individuals that lay claim to authority based on supernatural skills, such as the prophet or the magician, rather than the scholar who relies on legal reasoning and hermeneutical proficiency. Along similar lines, Fishbane suggested that the rabbinic *logia* proclaiming either the departure of the holy spirit from Israel (*t. Soṭah* 13:2) or the transference of prophecy from the prophets to the sages (*b. Megillah* 17b) were presumably a response to the 'revolutionary and antinomian potential of prophecy'. Such depictions, therefore, seem to express a 'neutralization of the prophetic impulse', its 'scribalization', and its 'reemployment in the service of the Law'.[22] I concur with this evaluation, but what needs to be emphasized is that the first of the dicta cited above proffers the view that the *ḥakham* is superior to the *navi* because the scholarly gift is prophetic in nature. We would do well here to recall the distinction between two kinds of prophecy that Abraham Joshua Heschel adduced from the talmudic passage, 'prophecy of the prophets' and 'prophecy of the Sages'.[23] On this account, the textual reasoning typified by the rabbis is a form of visionary knowledge that may be placed on the same footing as the apparitions of prophetic inspiration.[24]

The observation of Avdimi of Haifa that, since the destruction of the temple, prophecy was transferred to the sages and taken from the prophets, doubtlessly resonates with the view regarding the substitution of the priestly sacrificial cult by the ideals of Torah study and ritual performance, the cornerstones of the scholastic piety cultivated in rabbinic academies both within the Land of Israel and in the Diaspora. Perhaps hidden in Avdimi's comment, which was offered

ostensibly at the end of the third century, is a response to the claim of nascent Christian communities[25] that accorded legitimacy to the prophetic calling of Jesus as the scriptural foundation of their belief and practice.[26] Be that as it may, the strategy reflected in the dictum of Avdimi is not to deny the efficacy of prophecy, nor is it based on the supposition that the institution of prophecy ended at a certain point in the past. On the contrary, prophecy endures, but in the wake of the destruction of the temple it has been entrusted to the sages, an insight that affirms not only that previously recorded prophetic visions serve as the grist for the mill of rabbinic interpretation but also that the latter is inherently visionary. This, I surmise, is the intent of Ameimar's assertion that the 'sage is preferable to the prophet'—textual study, the principal task of the sage, is not merely on a par with prophecy; the metalogic of the hermeneutic that it entails is itself prophetic, albeit a genre of prophecy that exceeds the experiential level of the prophets.

MYSTICAL EXEGESIS AND IMAGINAL EMBODIMENT

I turn my focus now on the resonance of Ameimar's dictum in a number of passages from *Sefer ha-Zohar*, the major anthology of esoteric teaching, a text that began to assume literary form in the last two decades of the thirteenth century, although the redactional process may well have continued until the printing of the work in Mantua and Cremona between 1566 and 1568.[27] A growing consensus in the field of kabbalah study is that the different strata of the *Zohar*, composed in Hebrew and/or Aramaic, were products of a fraternity of kabbalists who assembled in the region of Castile.[28] Consistent with other Jewish mystical and pietistic groups of this period, the zoharic fraternity was presumably elitist in its make-up, even if the extant historical documents provide us with relatively sparse biographical information about the actual men who may have been involved in this enterprise. From the style and substance of the zoharic compilation, as well as the other kabbalistic treatises written by the presumed members of this fraternity, we may conclude that they were either practicing rabbinic leaders or had been trained in talmudic schools and were thus well versed in classical Jewish learning.

Deepening the midrashic sensibility, the medieval kabbalists whose views are recorded in the various strata of *Sefer ha-Zohar* maintained that it is through interpretation that one participates again in revelation. This experience exceeds the normal range of prophetic experience, however, for the kabbalist attains the highest level that sets him apart from all other prophets

with the exception of Moses. As we shall see, a case can be made that the adept (represented zoharically by the figure of Simeon ben Yoḥai) is on a par with, if not superior to, Moses. One of the rhetorical ways this insight was expressed was through the dictum of Ameimar, *ḥakham adif mi-navi*. For example, in the literary unit printed in the beginning of the Mantua edition and given the name *haqdamat sefer ha-zohar*, 'Introduction to the Book of the *Zohar*',[29] there appears an account of a visionary experience accorded to two members of the mystical fraternity (*ḥavrayya*), Eleazar and Abba, the former the son of Simeon ben Yoḥai, the head of the imaginary group, and the latter the one selected to be the scribe to chronicle the master's teachings.[30]

The vision occurred after the two sages merited the visitation of Rav Hamnuna the Elder, who descended from the celestial academy and took on the form of a donkey-driver to reveal secrets to them. The possibility of the appearance of this figure, who is portrayed in several zoharic homilies in images that are applied elsewhere to Simeon ben Yoḥai,[31] is cast in terms of a larger supernatural phenomenon described by the author of this passage as the ascent of the souls of the righteous from the lower Garden of Eden to the celestial academy in the upper Garden of Eden followed by the descent into this world. At times, the reader is told, these souls appear before human beings 'to perform miracles for them like the supernal angels'. Eleazar and Abba relate that they had seen 'the light of the supernal flame (*boṣina illa'ah*)', though they 'did not merit to contemplate and to know further the mysteries of wisdom (*leistakkela u-liminda razin de-ḥokhmata yattir*)' (*Zohar* 1:7a).

Consequent to the departure of Rav Hamnuna, Eleazar and Abba continued their journey on foot—their donkeys refused to move[32]—until they reached a 'certain mountain' where they beheld the 'master of colors, embroidered in forms, standing on a dais (*ma'rei de-gawwenin meruqqama be-ṣiyyurin qa'em al itstewana*)', possibly a reference to Metatron, who is described elsewhere in zoharic literature as being adorned in a display of colors befitting the rainbow (*Zohar* 1:181b). Upon completing their journey, Eleazar and Abba meet up with Simeon ben Yoḥai, who informs them that he had a vision of his own confirming their visionary experience and the consequent apotheosis alluded to in the words, 'I saw that your faces had changed (*de-ḥameina anpayyekhu meshanyyan*)'. At this point R. Yose, another member of the fraternity, proclaims: 'Well have you spoken, for a sage is preferable to a prophet (*de-ḥakham adif mi-navi*).'

The talmudic maxim is cited to reinforce the main point of the zoharic narrative concerning the visionary aptitude of the kabbalist expressed in an internal vision that occasions the metamorphosis of the mystic sage. The homily concludes, therefore, with the comment that from that day onward Simeon bestowed upon Eleazar and Abba the name 'Peniel', literally 'face

of God', a name linked exegetically to the verse uttered by Jacob, 'For I have seen God face to face' (Gen 32:31; *Zohar* 1:7a–b). The application of this title to Eleazar and Abba signifies that, in the mind of the zoharic authorship, they are to be construed as the imaginal embodiment, and not simply the symbolic correlate, of the divine in the mundane world. When these two sages entered before Simeon ben Yoḥai, therefore, the latter said to them: 'Surely, the countenance of *Shekhinah* has come, and thus they call you "Peniel", for you have seen the countenance of *Shekhinah* face-to-face' (*Zohar* 1:9a).[33]

Further substantiation of this interpretation may be elicited from another zoharic narrative (*Zohar* 1:244b–245a). Abba and Eleazar are described as having entered a cave at Lydda, allegedly to escape the heat of the sun, but while they sojourned there they sanctified the place by engaging in words of Torah. The centerpiece of the discussion is a teaching that Eleazar reported in the name of his father on the mystical significance of the bond of God to Israel adduced from the verse, 'Let me be as a seal upon your heart, like the seal upon your arm' (Song of Songs 8:6).[34] As they were sitting in the cave, they heard the voice of Simeon ben Yoḥai, who was coming on the way along with R. Isaac and R. Judah. Simeon ben Yoḥai approached the cave, Eleazar and Abba emerged, and the master declared: 'From the walls of the cave, I see that *Shekhinah* is here!' (*Zohar* 1:245a). It is possible to interpret this in terms of the rabbinic credo that the divine presence is found wherever Torah is studied (*m. Avot* 3:2; *b. Berakhot* 6a). I would suggest, however, that the intent of the zoharic passage goes further, indicating that the divine presence is not merely found in the physical location where members of the mystical fraternity were conversing about words of Torah, but that they are the incarnation of that presence, since Torah, hyper-literally conceived, is the literal composition of God, that is, an edifice made up of the Hebrew letters, which are comprised in the Tetragrammaton. Through exegesis of the text in its multiple levels of meaning, but especially by uncovering its secret meaning, the hermeneut, represented by the imaginary figures of Eleazar and Abba, is woven into the texture of the name, incorporated into the body of the divine, the pleroma of sefirotic potencies.

In this respect, the sage is surely more worthy than the prophet, a point confirmed in the explication of the verse: 'Indeed, my Lord God does nothing without having revealed his secret to his servants the prophets' (Amos 3:7) in another zoharic passage: '[This is] in the time that prophets are found in the world, and, if not, even though prophecy is not found, sages are more privileged than prophets' (*Zohar* 1:183b). Paradoxically, the zoharic assertion that the secret is disclosed to the sage in the absence of prophets subverts the very proposition that prophets are no longer found in the world. The mystical sage assumes a prophetic stature greater than the biblical prophets, and hence

he merits receiving the esoteric matter directly from God.[35] A level below the communication of this wisdom to the sage is the revelation transmitted in a dream, and beneath this form is the disclosure of secrets by the birds of heaven. A fuller discussion of this passage would be well served by a more careful investigation of the different extrasensory phenomena, to wit, revelatory experience, dream vision, and heeding the chirping of birds. What is essential to this discussion is the reiteration of the talmudic teaching that the sage is more privileged than the prophet.

Here it would be beneficial to cite the exposition of Ameimar's dictum in the *Mafteaḥ ha-Ḥokhmot* of the thirteenth-century kabbalist Abraham Abulafia. In spite of the substantial differences between the teachings and practices endorsed by Abulafia, known in scholarly parlance as prophetic-ecstatic kabbalah, and the teachings and practices attested in the various literary strata of *Sefer ha-Zohar*, referred to as theosophic-theurgic kabbalah, in this particular instance Abulafia's comment sheds light on the approach adopted by the individual(s) whose views are expressed in the afore-cited zoharic passage. The citation is extracted from an attempt on Abulafia's part to delineate the relationship between philosophical and kabbalistic wisdom:

> After this has been said by way of wisdom, it is appropriate to know that the kabbalah does not contradict what that wisdom revealed, for there is no [difference] between the wisdom and the kabbalah except that the kabbalah is conveyed by the mouth of the Active Intellect with greater depth than what wisdom conveys, even though both disclosures are from his mouth. The kabbalah is thus a more subtle comprehension, and a wisdom that is deeper than the wisdom comprehended through the material intellect. Hence, the sages receive from the prophets. And do not let the dictum that says the sage is preferable to the prophet cause you to err, for this dictum is true, but its matter is that the sage sees what he sees and comprehends what he comprehends through the wisdom of his mind, whereas the prophet sees what he sees by means of what is other. Therefore, it is said that he who sees what he sees by means of his mind is preferable to he who sees by means of what is other.[36]

Prima facie, the dictum of Ameimar would seem to present difficulties for Abulafia, since, in his thinking, the prophet should be equal, if not superior, to the sage, as the wisdom of the tradition is derived in a continuous succession from the prophets, and the ultimate goal of the mystical path is for the kabbalist to attain a state of conjunction, identified as prophecy. Abulafia explained Ameimar's dictum, however, by noting that the sage sees from the inner workings of the mind, whereas the vision of the prophet is through a medium outside the mind. A faithful, if quirky, disciple of Maimonides, Abulafia accepts that intellect is superior to imagination. The sage is one who envisions mental ideas, the prophet, one who sees images, presumably

also in the mind, but based on sensory images that relate to what is presumed to be external to consciousness. The privileging of the sage to prophet rests on the belief in the higher epistemological attainment of the former.

In two crucial respects, there is a similarity between the zoharic and Abulafian explanations. First, both assume that the intent of the statement is to defend, rather than to refute, the prophetic status of one privy to clandestine knowledge. Second, both insist—Abulafia explicitly and the author of the zoharic passage implicitly—that the wise one sees the truth in an interior manner, that the type of envisioning that marks the mystical attainment is not from a source extrinsic to the psyche. To be sure, in the case of both Abulafia and the Castilian kabbalists responsible for the zoharic homilies (at least in their earliest redactional layers), there is a homology between the soul of Israel and the divine,[37] and hence it is not possible to separate the theosophical and psychological in any definitive fashion. In my judgement, it has been a gross error by many kabbalah scholars to impose a false dichotomy, and on that basis render the history of Jewish mystical speculation in typological categories distinguished along the lines of valorizing the theosophical independent of the psychological versus a psychologization of the theosophic that places the latter under the stamp of the former. To speak of an inner illumination entails being illumined by the light of God, whether that is defined as the overflow of the separate intellects or as the emanation of the sefirotic potencies.

I conclude this section with confirmation of the interpretation of Ameimar's proverb, which I have ascribed both to the zoharic kabbalists and to Abulafia, elicited from the writings of Judah Loew ben Bezalel, the Maharal of Prague. Let me begin with a passage from his *Tif'eret Yisra'el*, a wide-ranging and comprehensive treatise on the nature of revelation:

> The Torah was given from God, blessed be he, by means of the prophet, but the level of intellect is greater than the prophet, as they said 'a sage is preferable to a prophet'. Hence, just as the activity of the intellect (*pe'ulat ha-sekhel*) is greater than nature . . . so the activity of the intellect is greater than prophecy (*nevu'ah*), as the sages, blessed be their memory, said 'a sage is preferable to a prophet'. The sages, therefore, are the perfection and completion of Torah. Even though it was given in Sinai through Moses, who was the prophet of the Lord, it was from the side of wisdom, which is greater than prophecy. The perfection of Torah is by means of the intellect, which clarifies everything (*mevarer ha-kol*).[38]

Sagacity supersedes prophecy, the power of intellect is superior to the imagination. Even though Torah was revealed to a prophet, it is completed and perfected by the sages, who proffer multiple interpretations justified by appeal to the exercise of intellect. One might be inclined to set wisdom in diametric opposition to prophecy. Upon closer examination, however, it appears that

Maharal views the event of Sinai as an instance where the prophetic and intellectual come together. Moses, accordingly, embodies the ideal of an intellectual prophet, one who receives the prophetic credo from the 'side of wisdom', a locution that most likely carries kabbalistic overtones and thus should alert us to the fact that the conception of intellect affirmed by Maharal should not be identified simply with the natural reason of the philosophic tradition.[39] The equation of Torah and intellect is meant to underscore the otherworldly nature of the former. The claim that Moses received Torah from the side of wisdom implies, therefore, that his prophetic vocation was linked uniquely to the world-to-come, to that which transcends the physical, and hence, to that which is beyond the visible.

Maharal's position is made clear from the explication of Ameimar's maxim in his commentary on the talmudic aggadot. I translate the crucial part of the text that is initiated with a consideration of the meaning of the rhetorical question posed by the redactional voice to the observation of Avdimi, 'Isn't the sage a prophet?' Maharal assures the reader that this is certainly so, as the prophet is identified as one who knows the future, a hidden matter (*davar nistar*) that is not known by all (*bilti yadu'a el ha-kol*), and similarly, the sage is someone who acquires knowledge from God about a matter that is not widely known. Although the wisdom of the sage is dependent on intellect (*sekhel*), the potentiality of the latter is actualized through divine intervention. Based on this criterion, the sage should be deemed a prophet, who similarly is dependent on God bestowing knowledge as an act of benevolence. But then, how do we explain Ameimar's surmise that the sage is preferable to the prophet?

> For prophecy is through parable (*ḥiddah*) and vision (*mar'eh*), whereas the sage knows what is concealed (*ha-ne'elam*)[40] and what is not known by others (*ha-bilti yadu'a le-aḥerim*), neither by vision nor through parables, but rather he comprehends with a lucid comprehension (*hassagah berurah*) . . . And the sage knows what will be in the future as well, as he comprehends the ways of the Lord . . . for there is no accident, but everything is ordered by God, and he, blessed be he, comes to him in an intellectual order (*seder sikhli*) . . . Surely, the sage is a prophet.[41]

Prophetic understanding (*hassagat ha-nevu'ah*) is a lower level than wisdom, for it relies on the agency of imagination, communicated through vision and parable, as opposed to a lucid comprehension (*hassagah berurah*), which is associated with the intellect. The sage apprehends the matter clearly, through a translucent speculum, while the prophet sees it darkly, through the veil of parable, by way of double vision, metaphoric duplicity, the image and its image. Maharal is careful not to equate prophecy with physical sight, but he insists that it is a form of seeing nonetheless, and hence it shares some phenomenological features with the domain of the ocular. Thus, commenting on the

scriptural designations of the prophet *ro'eh* (1 Sam 9:9) and *ḥozeh* (2 Kgs 17:13), Maharal writes: 'From this we know that just as the eye sees a thing, and the sense of the eye is conjoined to the sensible, so with prophecy, this faculty is conjoined to what one sees and envisions through prophecy. Just as the eye does not see a thing that is separate from the sense . . . so the faculty of prophecy does not see the thing that is separate, the world-to-come.'[42] As visionary knowledge, prophecy is limited to matters of the corporeal world; only the intellect can gain access to the spiritual realities, designated by the traditional nomenclature *olam ha-ba*, the world-to-come, the world-that-is-coming, futurity in an (in)essential way, the what-will-be that has always already been. To understand this claim, we must bear in mind that, according to Maharal, the world-to-come (*olam ha-ba*) is positioned as the diametric opposite of this world (*olam ha-zeh*), the one incorporeal and the other corporeal. Prophetic vision is limited to the former, whereas intellectual comprehension extends to matters beyond the phenomenalizable. This is the import of Ameimar's adage that the sage is preferable to the prophet:

> There is a difference between wisdom (*ḥokhmah*) and prophecy (*nevu'ah*), for the sage comprehends from the side of his intellect, and since he comprehends from the side of his intellect, he can comprehend the matters that are most concealed and hidden, but the prophet is called a 'visionary' (*ḥozeh*) or a 'seer' (*ro'eh*), for the matter that is seen from outside belongs to his seeing. Hence, every prophet requires conjunction with the matter to which his prophecy relates, and he is conjoined to these matters and knows them in accordance with his prophecy. Therefore the sages said 'the sage is preferable to the prophet'.[43]

In the continuation of this discussion, Maharal readily admits that prophecy is not a 'comprehension through a physical sense' (*hassagat ha-ḥush ha-gashmi*), but it is comparable to the sense experience, inasmuch as there is always a conjunction between the faculty of perception—in the case of prophecy, this is identified as the imagination (*koaḥ ha-medammeh*) or simply as that which receives the prophecy (*koaḥ ha-meqabbel ha-nevu'ah*)—and the perceptible object. The sage is greater than the prophet, for:

> He can comprehend and know the hidden matters (*ha-devarim ha-ne'elamim*), and he can bring them forth from his own intellect. On account of this difference, the prophet, in contrast to the sage, is called 'visionary' (*ḥozeh*) or 'seer' (*ro'eh*). As a consequence, the matter of the world-to-come (*inyan olam ha-ba*) and the immortality of the soul (*hish'arut nefesh*) do not fall within the scope of the prophet . . . for this is a matter that is separate from humanity, and since it is entirely separate from humanity, prophecy does not apply to it. . . . Therefore, the sages said (*b. Berakhot* 34b),[44] 'All the prophets prophesied only about the days of messiah, but with regard to the world-to-come "no eye has seen it, [O God,] but you" (Isa 64:3)'.[45]

Prophetic vision is limited to matters of the sensible world, including the messianic era, but the spiritual realm, the world-to-come, can be discerned by the special kind of gnosis that is sustained by the fount of divine wisdom.

PROPHETIC WISDOM AND EXTENDING THE LAW

To return to the zoharic literature, the contrast between sage and prophet is drawn in another passage:

> Thus the holy One, blessed be he, wanted to reveal to us the supernal mysteries that he produces, as it is written, 'Indeed, my Lord God does nothing without having revealed his secret to his servants the prophets' (Amos 3:7). The sages are more privileged than prophets in every time (*ḥakkimei adifei mi-nevi'ei be-khol zeman*), for with regard to the prophets, sometimes the holy spirit (*ruaḥ qudsha*) rested upon them and sometimes it did not, but with regard to the sages, the holy spirit does not depart from them for even one second. Furthermore, they know what is above and what is below, but they do not need to disclose . . . R. Abba said: If there were no sages, people would not know what the Torah is and what the commandments of the master of the world are, and the spirit of man would not be differentiated from the spirit of the beast. (*Zohar* 2:6b)[46]

In this extract an additional element to what we have already discovered is emphasized: the supremacy of the prophetic status of the sage relates not only to the fact that the visionary inspiration of the kabbalist is linked to the wisdom that is embodied in the Torah, but also to his unremitting access to the holy spirit. However, in spite, or perhaps because, of the fact that he knows what is above and what is below in this intimate and immediate way, the sage is not driven to disclose the mystical secrets. In contrast to explicit statements made elsewhere in zoharic literature that assign to Simeon ben Yoḥai the urge, indeed the need, to divulge the mysteries lest they be erased from Israel's collective memory (*Zohar* 1:245a, 2:190b, 291a),[47] the reservation expressed in this passage suggests that the supremacy of the sage to the prophet includes the former's ability to withhold the insights he has attained. We may surmise that this pietistic diffidence is in greater accord with the nomian perspective shaped by the rabbinic ethos, a view that is substantiated by the concluding remark that the sages impart knowledge of the commandments without which the human spirit would be indistinguishable from the beast.

There is, however, another zoharic passage that contains a paraphrase of Ameimar's dictum that raises the prospect that some of the kabbalists responsible for the literary production of the earliest redactional strata of the

text maintained that esoteric gnosis may occasion a venturing beyond the limits of the law:

> Come and see: What is the difference between those who are engaged in the study of Torah (*innun de-mishtaddelei be-orayta*) and the faithful prophets (*nevi'ei meheimenei*)? Those who are engaged in Torah are more privileged than the prophets at all times (*innun de-mishtaddelei be-orayta adifei mi-nevi'ei be-khol zimna*). Why is this so? For they stand in a higher gradation than the prophets. Those who are engaged in the study of Torah stand above in the place that is called Torah, the pillar of all faith (*qiyyuma de-khol meheimanuta*), and the prophets stand below in a place that is called *Neṣaḥ* and *Hod*. Therefore, those who are engaged in Torah are more privileged than the prophets, and they are superior to them (*illa'in minhon yattir*), for they exist above and the others exist below. Those who utter words by the holy spirit (*innun de-amrei millin be-ruaḥ ha-qodesh*) exist beneath all of them. (*Zohar* 3:35a)

Each of the three parts of Scripture is accorded a place in the topography of the divine. The Written Torah corresponds to *Tif'eret*, the sixth gradation, the *sefirah* of Moses, also called the 'pillar of all faith' (*qiyyuma de-khol meheimanuta*), which is the gradation attained by the kabbalists who are designated by the technical expression 'the ones engaged in Torah' (*innun de-mishtaddelei be-orayta*). The Prophets occupy the place of *Neṣaḥ* and *Hod*, respectively, the seventh and eighth gradations, the level attained by those who are endowed with prophecy. The Writings, which are the works of those who 'utter words by the holy spirit' (*de-amrei millin be-ruaḥ ha-qodesh*), are linked to *Malkhut*, the last gradation.

The notion that kabbalistic masters reach the level of Moses, the ideal of all prophets, is related to the larger claim that hermeneutical prowess stems from direct communication of the secret matters through a supernatural process of a revelatory nature. Does this re-enactment of the Sinaitic epiphany sustain or challenge the nomian character of the original revelation? It would seem that aligning the sage with Moses, whose gradation is identified as the Written Torah, secures the nomianism of the tradition with its unambiguous distinction between pure and impure, good and evil, and thus moral and religious perfection would be endemic to the exemplary sage. An explication of the zoharic position in this light is attested, for instance, in a section in Ḥayyim Volozhyn's *Nefesh ha-Ḥayyim* wherein these very texts are invoked to buttress the view that the Torah sage attains a state of divine inspiration superior to that of the prophet. This pre-eminence is expressed not only by the fact that the wise man is in an inspired state continually and hence he has permission 'in every moment to search the treasures of the holy king, and all the upper gates are opened before him', but also by the fact that he 'contemplates the internal light' and in so doing apprehends the 'depths of the supernal

mysteries', the 'secrets of Torah' that are concealed from others.[48] We may aver with confidence that in the mind of this Lithuanian rabbinic authority the content of the esoteric wisdom cannot contradict the ethical-ritual strictures of the halakhic tradition.

The matter, however, is more complex, as the continuation of the zoharic passage itself attests: 'Praiseworthy are those who are engaged in Torah for they are on the higher gradation. More than anyone else, and thus the one who toils in Torah (*de-laʿei be-orayta*) does not need sacrifices or burnt-offerings, for Torah is more privileged than everything (*de-ha orayta adif mi-kola*), and it is the bond of the faith of everything (*qishshura di-meheimanuta de-khola*)' (*Zohar* 3:35a). By allocating to the sage the position of Moses, and thereby establishing the superiority of the sage to the prophet, the anonymous author of the zoharic text raised the possibility of a hypernomian (as opposed to antinomian) overcoming of the law.[49] To be sure, the particular example is the cult of sacrifices, but surely the contention that the sage engaged in Torah study, which, as I have already made clear, is a reference to the kabbalist, has no need for sacrifices opens the door for a more comprehensive rejection of ceremonial behavior.[50] A hint to that effect is given in the interesting rendering of the talmudic dictum *ḥakham adif mi-navi* as *de-ha orayta adif mi-kola*, the Torah—and not the sage—is the most privileged, which is followed by its depiction as the 'bond of the faith of everything', *qishshura di-meheimanuta de-khola*. In the zoharic lexicon the term *meheimanuta* can denote the realm of *sefirot* in their entirety, and thus the identification of Torah as the 'bond of the faith of everything'[51] indicates that the gradation to which it corresponds, *Tif'eret*, contains the totality of the divine potencies, a notion that is expressed as well by the fact that the Tetragrammaton, the four letters in which the ten *sefirot* are encoded, is assigned to *Tif'eret*. But there is another implication that ensues from the theosophic symbolism: the term 'faith' is the essence of Torah, an essence that may surpass the specificities of the nomian rituals, as the zoharic author suggests with respect to sacrifices. That the sage is greater than the prophet may imply, therefore, that the former attains a state of mindfulness that renders superfluous the laws based on a distinction between permissible and forbidden, a messianic idea that is expressed in different sections of the zoharic corpus as well as other kabbalistic treatises, which greatly influenced later expressions of hypernomianism in Jewish thinkers, including several of the critical Sabbatian kabbalists.[52]

In the latter strata of the zoharic literature we find further evidence that the dictum of Ameimar was used to justify ascribing a higher prophetic status to the kabbalist with hypernomian implications. The complex and ambivalent attitude toward rabbinic ritual in the *Raʿaya Meheimna* and *Tiqqunei Zohar* has been well noted in scholarly studies.[53] The author of these works, as Isaiah

Tishby put it, was 'an extraordinary kabbalist who, for unknown reasons perhaps connected with his own personal psychology or with some social situation, tried to have the best of both worlds, seeking both to glorify and destroy rabbinic tradition'.[54] Tishby explains the 'apparent contradiction between the author's denigration of the halakhah and his advocacy of the practice of the commandments'[55] by appeal to the view, which resonates with the stance espoused by Scholem,[56] that 'mysticism in general, and kabbalah in particular, often displays this contrast between conservatism on the one hand and originality on the other'.[57] The analytic category of hypernomianism that I have proposed, as opposed to antinomianism, provides an alternate way to assess the paradox: eradication of ritual is taking hold of the ritual at its root, a fixing of the center at the margin; no one demarcates the limit of the law like the outlaw who trespasses the boundary of the law.[58] To illustrate the point, I will translate and analyze a passage from the *Ra'aya Meheimna*, but one that deals less with an eschatological abrogation of the traditional commandments, which has been the main focus of previous scholars, and more with the attainment of a mystical vision, occasioned by the annihilation of the self in the Infinite, that challenged what was at the time becoming in elite medieval rabbinic circles the widespread aniconic and apophatic understanding of the foundational dogma of biblical monotheism, namely, the non-phenomenalizable and unknowable nature of the God of Israel. The relevant section appears after Moses, addressed by the technical title 'faithful shepherd', distinguishes between those who belong to the world of the dead (*olam ha-metim*) and those who belong to the world of the living (*olam ha-ḥayyim*)—the latter, unlike the former, are capable of beholding spiritual matters.

R. Simeon said: Faithful shepherd, with all of this you cannot contemplate with the eyes those from the world-to-come or the angels, and how much more so the holy One, blessed be he, and his *Shekhinah*. Rather, with the eye of the intellect of your heart (*be-ein ha-sekhel de-libbekha*) you see everything, those of the world-to-come, the angels, the holy One, blessed be he, and his *Shekhinah*, who surround you. And thus it is written concerning Solomon, 'He was wiser than every other human' (1 Kgs 5:11), 'my heart saw much wisdom and knowledge' (Eccles 1:16). With regard to prophecy, you do not have permission to contemplate with the eye of the intellect but rather with the eyes, which are a vision and sight of the eyes (*mar'ah we-ḥezyon de-ayyenin*), as it is written 'I was known in a vision to him' (Num 12:7), and 'in an apparition of the night' (Job 33:15)—a vision (*mar'ah*) in the day, an apparition (*ḥezyon*) in the night. Everything [is seen] through the eyes and not by the eye of the intellect of the heart (*be-ein ha-sekhel de-libba*), and the eyes are two agents and servants of the heart, and it is a king amongst them, and, consequently, the sage is preferable to the prophet. And thus the two ears are servants of the heart, and, accordingly, the rabbis established that the heart sees and the heart hears. Moreover, it is said with respect to the heart

that the heart comprehends and the heart knows. 'In the heart of every one wise of heart, I granted wisdom' (Exod 31:6). Hence, wisdom, understanding, and knowledge are in the heart, for through them heaven, earth, and the depths were created, and through them the Tabernacle was made, as it is written 'I filled him with the spirit of God in wisdom, understanding, and knowledge' (Exod 31:3), none of which is in the eyes. Faithful shepherd, the one for whom all of this is in his heart, you see more than the prophet, and all the more so your thought (*maḥshavta dilakh*), which has no limit (*de-leit lah sof*), and through it you contemplate that which has no limit (*u-vah tistakkel be-ha-hu de-leit veih sof*), that about which you did not at first have permission to gaze upon with the eyes, as it is written, 'You saw my back but my face was not seen' (Exod 33:23). The foolish of heart are dead and blinded by the shells, but for you these are not considered as anything, and they do not separate you from the holy One, blessed be he, and his Presence, and all those from the world-to-come and the angels come to you through the windows of the eyes, ears, nostrils, and mouth, like a king that comes clandestinely into the chamber of chambers to converse with his son. (*Zohar* 2:116b–117a *[Ra'aya Meheimna]*)

The supremacy of the sage over the prophet, personified in Moses—I agree with the conjecture that the Castilian kabbalist responsible for this stratum of zoharic literature thought of himself as an avatar of the biblical lawgiver,[59] an identification that may have had messianic overtones[60]—is expressed by the ability to envision spiritual matters with an 'eye of the intellect of the heart' (*ein ha-sekhel de-libba*), a hybrid locution that combines two commonplace idioms in medieval Hebrew parlance, the 'eye of the intellect' (*ein ha-sekhel*) and the 'eye of the heart' (*ein ha-lev*). Prophecy is depicted as a sensible vision that occurs diurnally or nocturnally, the former marked linguistically as *mar'ah* and the latter as *ḥezyon*. The kabbalists, by contrast, are masters of the gnosis of the heart, which encompasses wisdom (*ḥokhmah*), understanding (*tevunah*), and knowledge (*da'at*), through which the cosmos was created and the tabernacle was made. The sage, accordingly, sees more than the prophet, albeit in a mode of intellectual envisioning, that is, a seeing of the heart rather than a seeing of the eyes. The highest visionary attainment is contemplating that which has no limit, language that reflects the mystical ideal of *maḥshavah ha-deveqah* enunciated by earlier kabbalists in Provence and Catalonia, the noetic elevation of human thought and its ontic participation in the infinite divine thought.

What is exceptional in this passage, however, is the linking of this well-documented kabbalistic tenet to the biblical assertion that no one, not even Moses, is permitted to see the face of God (Exod 33:23). According to the exegetical rendering preserved in this textual repository, the denial of seeing the face is applied exclusively to a physical vision; Moses, we may presume, was capable of beholding the face through the expansion of thought to the limitless. I would surmise, moreover, that the author is influenced by the

Maimonidean explication of this verse according to which 'face' is to be decoded as an allegorical reference to the divine essence. Hence, the response to Moses that neither he nor anyone could see God's face is rendered apophatically, marking the incapacity of a mortal being, even one at the highest level of enlightenment, to know God's essence and true reality (Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed* 1.37, 54, 64). The mental ascent, briefly intimated in the *Ra'aya Meheimna* passage, presumably occasions seeing the face, albeit a face that cannot be faced without being effaced, a disfiguring of the face in apprehending the essence that cannot be apprehended but as the essence that cannot be apprehended. By contemplating through thought the thought that is without limit, the mystic is conjoined to the limit of thought, the infinite, *ein sof*, in the nomenclature of the kabbalists, or in its philological equivalent in medieval philosophical Hebrew, *bilti ba'al takhlit*, the (un) thought beyond what can be thought, even if thought as unthought.

This reading is buttressed by an elaborate theoretical discussion from *Tiqqunei Zohar* concerning the impact of transgression on the sefirotic edifice, illustrated by the example of Adam and Abel. After it is established that they both sinned with respect to the place of *Maḥshavah*, enumerated as the second of the ten emanations, R. Eleazar proposes to his father, R. Simeon, that, first, we must acknowledge that several of the divine gradations are called 'thought' (*maḥshavah*), and second, that sin targets only the lower aspects of thought, which are compared metaphorically to garments, but it does not reach the three supernal *sefirot*, *Keter*, *Ḥokhmah*, and *Binah*, even though they, too, are called *maḥshavah* (*Tiqqunei Zohar* 69, 115a). The master, who is not swayed, responds:

> R. Simeon said: My son, surely Adam sinned with respect to them all, in thought that is a garment and in thought that is within. On account of this, when Moses said 'Show me your glory' (Exod 33:18), he said, 'No man shall see me and live', for if one were worthy to see me, he would live forever. Therefore, he said to him, 'You cannot see my face' (Exod 33:20). There are no faces here except faces that are not seen in the place that the Cause of Causes (*illat ha-illot*) is known, and in the place that it is revealed. The sin of Adam brought about that Moses was not able to gaze upon it, how much more so, another, for the Cause of Causes is removed from the Thought (*maḥshavah*) against which Adam transgressed. Accordingly, no eye can see it, and thought cannot comprehend or apprehend it, as it is the life of lives (*ḥai ha-ḥayyim*). In the place that it resides, there is no death. (*Tiqqunei Zohar* 69, 115a)

R. Eleazar is obstinate, and thus he persists in arguing with his father that the effect of the sin reaches only the garment (*levusha*) of thought, but it cannot touch the supernal thought (*maḥshavah illa'ah*), that which remains

within the brain that is without a skull (*ishta'ar ihu veha-hi de-ihi mi-lega'w be-moḥa be-lo qarqafta*). R. Simeon responds even more emphatically:

> My son, he sinned even with respect to Thought that is the brain (*maḥshavah de-ihu moḥa*), for the seed comes out from there, the sap of the Tree of Life (*nevi'u de-ilana de-ḥayyei*), which is the primordial light (*or qadmon*), the resplendent light (*or ṣaḥ*), and the dazzling light (*or meṣuḥṣaḥ*), the three drops hinted at in the supernal *yod*, the tip above, the tip below, and the spine in the middle. There he mixed darkness, which separates the Cause of Causes and the concealed brain (*moḥa setima*), and, consequently, 'No man shall see me and live', until the darkness passes from there. And this is the mystery of 'But your iniquities have been a barrier between you and your God' (Isa 59:2). And because of this darkness, no thought can comprehend there, let alone an eye, until the darkness is removed from there. Corresponding to it below there is the cloud of darkness about which it says 'You have screened yourself off with a cloud' (Lam 3:44). R. Eleazar, all the fellows, and all the elders of the academy trembled. R. Eleazar said, 'Until now we did not know that human sin was so high, for it reaches the place of the most supernal (*atar illa'ah de-khol illa'in*)'. (*Tiqqunei Zohar* 69, 115b)

If we relate this passage intertextually with the one cited previously in which the supremacy of Moses to other prophets was cast in terms of his being able to contemplate through his thought the divine thought that has no limit, then we can argue that, in the mind of the anonymous kabbalist, the state attributed to Moses was the prelapsarian condition of Adam. The scholastic debate regarding the ontic status of transgression ends with Eleazar acknowledging (on behalf of himself, the other members of the fraternity, and the elders of the heavenly academy) the veracity of his father's insistence that sin reaches the highest manifestation of the divine, the infinite thought lodged within the brain whence the seminal efflux of light, orthographically encoded in the letter *yod*—the tripartite structure that alludes to the triadic union of the primordial light (*or qadmon*), the resplendent light (*or ṣaḥ*), and the dazzling light (*or meṣuḥṣaḥ*),[61] an idea whose Christological implications were well exploited and debated in the course of history[62]—issues forth to sustain the Tree of Life. The admonition given to Moses that no human can see God's face and live is explained as a consequence of the offense in the Garden of Eden. Had there been no sin, it would have been possible to have such a vision. In a more technical elocution, as a result of the sinful act, God mixed darkness with the primordial light, the darkness became a barrier separating the Cause of Causes and the concealed brain. The vision is obstructed until the shroud of darkness will be removed.

I take issue, therefore, with the surmise that this passage promotes the 'victory of mystical antirationalism over Aristotelian rationalism', as well as the related conclusion that Adam sullied the 'abstract transcendence' of the Cause of Causes.[63] The issue at hand, in my judgement, is an intricately

nuanced undoing of the apophatic paradigm that was cultivated by mystic visionaries in large measure due to the influence of Neoplatonic ontology. According to the anonymous author of *Ra'aya Meheimna* and *Tiqqunei Zohar*, the human potential prior to the original sin was such that one could comprehend the incomprehensible mind of God, one could see the unseeable face. On this reading, Adam does not sully the abstract transcendence of the Cause of Causes as much as he renders a tangible and accessible transcendence abstract and inaccessible by creating a screen of darkness that separates it from the concealed thought, the uppermost aspect of the Godhead. The transgressive behavior of Adam, which limited the scope of human knowledge vis-à-vis the Infinite, will be rectified in the messianic era. The restoration of the beginning at the end can be designated an apophasis of apophasis, a termination to not-knowing occasioned by a return to the ideal state in which the unknowing is known in the knowing of the unknown. The present inability to know the unknowing is not upheld as an inevitable epistemological shortcoming, but it is rather a consequence of indiscretion and hence a matter of temporal contingency. The reply to Moses that no human can see the divine face and survive is not interpreted as an affirmation of the *via negativa*, the cloud of unknowing, the seeing of darkness that is light, for once the darkness separating the Cause of Causes and the hidden brain is removed, then what is imperceptible will be perceived, albeit in its imperceptibility.

I would submit that the idea proffered in this stratum of zoharic literature is an unsaying of the unsaid, a visualization of the invisible. What is at stake, then, is not affirming a mystical irrationalism or debunking an Aristotelian rationalism. The anonymous kabbalist adopted an intellectualist mysticism—the terms used to denote the Infinite in the later strata of zoharic literature are *illat ha-illot* and *illat kol ha-illot*, philosophical expressions, and not the more familiar Ein Sof[64]—based on the paradox that in matters related to the divine every assertion is a denial, every saying an unsaying, indeed, saying the unsaid in unsaying the said. The author of this text may adopt a more theistic and less pantheistic conception of the Infinite,[65] but he does not completely overcome the apophaticism. Indeed, as the reader is informed, the Cause of Causes vis-à-vis all the other hidden and concealed illuminations is described as the soul in relation to the body, and the primordial light—which precedes all the emanations, letters, vowel-points, and cantillation signs—vis-à-vis the Cause of Causes is depicted as the body in relation to the soul. Regarding the Cause of Causes, therefore, all we can say is that there is nothing to say. The philosophic truth regarding this learned ignorance is expressed in a poetic flourish attributed to Elijah in one of the introductions to *Tiqqunei Zohar*: 'Master of the worlds, You are one but not in number, You are the supernal of all those who are supernal, the hidden of all that which is hidden, no thought can grasp You at all. You are the one that

brought forth ten embellishments (*tiqqunim*), and You called them ten *sefirot*, so that You may guide through them concealed worlds that were not revealed, and worlds that were revealed, and through them You are concealed from human beings' (*Tiqqunei Zohar*, Intro., 17a).

It should come as no surprise that this same kabbalist produced a litany of apophatic declamations with respect to the Cause of Causes, 'there is no color, no form, no image, no participation', concluding with the rhetorical query, 'in the place where the eye cannot rule, who can produce an image (*ma'n yakhil leme'vad dimyon*)?' (*Tiqqunei Zohar* 69, 115b). In seeing that there is nothing to see, one sees that one does not see, and in so seeing, one no longer does not see. The supremacy of the sage to the prophet consists in attaining this blinding vision, the ability to see what there is not to see, an unseeing that makes seeing the unseen both possible and impossible, possible because the unseen can be seen, impossible because what can be seen is the unseen.

NOTES

It is a great honor and privilege for me to contribute this essay to the volume celebrating the scholarly accomplishments of my revered teacher and cherished colleague Michael Fishbane, a man of intellectual rigor, spiritual depth, and theological courage.

1. Michael Fishbane, *The Garments of Torah: Essays in Biblical Hermeneutics* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1989), 65.
2. On the shift from prophet to commentator, see Moses Halbertal, *People of the Book: Canon, Meaning, and Authority* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 22–3.
3. Fishbane, *Garments*, 67–73. For a more detailed and technical discussion, see Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 443–505. A specific application of the complex interplay between textual exegesis and visionary experience is offered by Fishbane's student, Benjamin D. Sommer, *A Prophet Reads Scripture: Allusion in Isaiah 40–66* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).
4. Fishbane, *Garments*, 67.
5. Ibid. 77 (emphasis in the original). For an elaboration, see Michael Fishbane, 'Revelation and Tradition: Aspects of Inner-Biblical Exegesis', *JBL* 99 (1980), 343–61.
6. Fishbane returns to this motif in 'The Well of Living Water: A Biblical Motif and Its Ancient Transformations', in Michael Fishbane and Emanuel Tov (eds.), *Sha'arei Talmon: Studies in the Bible, Qumran, and the Ancient Near East Presented to Shemaryahu Talmon* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1992), 3–16.

7. Fishbane, *Garments*, 78.
8. See Fishbane's 'Introduction', to Michael Fishbane (ed.), *The Midrashic Imagination: Jewish Exegesis, Thought, and History* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993), 1.
9. Michael Fishbane, *The Exegetical Imagination: On Jewish Thought and Theology* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), 9. See id., *Garments of Torah*, 112–13 and 128–32.
10. Fishbane, *Exegetical Imagination*, 10.
11. Fishbane, *Garments*, 42–3.
12. The rabbinic theme is expanded in medieval kabbalistic sources. See e.g. *Zohar* 1:190a; 2:15a; 3:163a.
13. Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1990), 110. See also Steven D. Fraade, *From Tradition to Commentary: Torah and its Interpretation in the Midrash Sifre to Deuteronomy* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991), 25–68.
14. *Pesiqta de-Rav Kahana*, ed. Bernard Mandelbaum (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1962), 1:219, Baḥodesh, 20.
15. For a more elaborate presentation, see Elliot R. Wolfson, *Alef, Mem, Tau: Kabbalistic Musings on Time, Truth, and Death* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 64–6.
16. At the final stage of preparing this essay, I became aware of the recently published study by Alon Goshen-Gottstein, '"The Sage is Superior to the Prophet": The Conception of Torah through the Prism of the History of Jewish Exegesis' [in Hebrew], in Howard Kreisel (ed.), *Study and Knowledge in Jewish Thought*, vol. 2 (Beer Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2006), 37–77. My thanks to Daniel Abrams, who called my attention to this collection of essays in which I discovered Goshen-Gottstein's piece. I have made an effort to incorporate references to his work in the notes, even though my own essay was conceptualized and written before I had knowledge of his own analysis of this rabbinic dictum. Not only are both of us interested in the midrashic applications of this teaching, even if our specific interpretative strategies diverge, but we similarly view the *Zohar* as the crucial source that influenced subsequent authors. See below, n. 27.
17. In his commentary to the verse, the twelfth-century exegete Abraham Ibn Ezra cites *u-mah navi la-ish* (1 Sam 9:7) as another scriptural attestation to the form *navi*. See also Lam 5:9 and Neh 10:38.
18. A similar modification is attested in the Targum to Psalms, which renders the scriptural verse as *lemimenei yomana ken yitkawen lehoda beram neviya delibbeih mabba ḥukhmata*, 'Who is appropriate to instruct us about numbering our days but the prophet whose heart pours forth wisdom?'
19. Ephraim E. Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs*, trans. Israel Abrahams (repr. Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1987), 578.
20. See ibid. 306.

21. An extreme formulation of this perspective is offered by Judah Goldin, *Studies in Midrash and Related Literature*, ed. Barry L. Eichler and Jeffrey H. Tigay (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1988), 382: 'A rabbi is not a prophet and receives no supernatural messages. Although he might occasionally wish for supernatural vindication or support.' This view is reiterated in the explanation of Ameimar's dictum offered by Yuval Harari, 'The Sages and the Occult', in Shmuel Safrai, Zeev Safrai, Joshua Schwartz, and Peter J. Tomson (eds.), *The Literature of the Sages, Second Part* (Assen: Royal Van Gorcum, 2006), 543–4. The author, however, does acknowledge that prophecy in the talmudic context can also denote the seeing of a hidden reality (544, n. 111).
22. Fishbane, *Garments*, 75.
23. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Heavenly Torah as Refracted through the Generations*, ed., trans., and with commentary by Gordon Tucker and Leonard Levin (New York: Continuum, 2005), 512–13.
24. Abraham J. Heschel, *Prophetic Inspiration after the Prophets: Maimonides and Other Medieval Authorities* (Hoboken: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1996), 8–13. Heschel's explanation, as he himself noted (p. 9), echoes the interpretation of Ameimar's dictum proffered by several medieval Talmudic commentators, especially Moses ben Naḥman (Ramban) and Yom Ṭov ben Abraham Ishbili (Ritba).
25. The possible anti-Christian underpinning of the rabbinic statements was suggested by Nahum N. Glatzer, 'A Study of the Talmudic Interpretation of Prophecy', *Review of Religion* (1946), 116, 136, cited in Fishbane, *Garments*, 141, n. 22.
26. On the prophetic role and pronouncements of Jesus, see David E. Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1983), 153–88.
27. Boaz Huss, 'A Sage is Preferable to a Prophet: R. Simeon bar Yoḥai and Moses in the Zohar' [in Hebrew], *Kabbalah: Journal for the Study of Jewish Mystical Texts*, 4 (1999), 103–39, employs the rabbinic idiom as a rhetorical device to encapsulate his thesis that the fictional sage of the zoharic text is superior to the biblical prophet. My intent in this essay, by contrast, is to explore interpretations of the dictum itself, though there will be obvious points of overlap, which I shall duly note. See also Goshen-Gottstein, 'The Sage', 48, who notes that the zoharic interpretations of Ameimar's dictum had the greatest influence on later discussions.
28. For an extensive discussion of this hypothesis, see Yehuda Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, trans. Arnold Schwartz, Stephanie Nakache, and Penina Peli (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993), 85–138.
29. For discussion of this literary matter, see Daniel Abrams, 'When Was the Introduction to the *Zohar* Written, with Variants in the Different Versions of the Introduction in the Mantua Print' [in Hebrew], *Asufot*, 8 (1994), 211–26.
30. On the scribal activity of R. Abba, see *Zohar* 2:123b. I note, parenthetically, that in the introduction to one of the most recondite sections of the zoharic anthology, *Idra Rabba*, the 'Great Assembly,' Eleazar, Abba, and Simeon ben Yoḥai, are designated the three pillars upon which the world stands, for they

correspond to the three columns in the divine pleroma, the right side of love, the left side of judgement, and the middle side of mercy, which is a balance between the extremes (*Zohar* 3:128a). A similar triangulation is attested in other zoharic passages, for example, at the beginning of the *Idra Zuṭa*, the textual unit that records the final revelation of secrets prior to the demise of Simeon ben Yoḥai (*Zohar* 3:287b). See Tishby, *Wisdom*, 155–8; Liebes, *Studies*, 9–10, 20–1, 75.

31. Huss, 'Sage', 114, n. 46.
32. The author of the zoharic text may have in mind Abraham's instruction to his servants to stay put with the donkey as he and Isaac approached the place where the latter was to be offered as a sacrifice to God (Gen 22:5).
33. Liebes, *Studies*, 75.
34. Wolfson, 'Suffering Eros', 353–4.
35. The reading I have offered here lends support to the view of Charles Mopsik, that 'it is possible to see the kabbalah of the zoharic circle as a specific type of prophetic kabbalah', and that the redaction of the text itself can be viewed as an attempt to concretize the actual experience of prophecy in literary form. See *R. Moses de Leon's Sefer Sheqel ha-Qodesh*, critically edited and introduced by Charles Mopsik (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 1996), 6–7. In part, Mopsik's remarks are offered as a corrective to the typological distinction between theosophic kabbalah and prophetic kabbalah, a taxonomy that has dominated scholarship. In this endeavor his opinion dovetails with my own. I am grateful that Mopsik cites one of my essays, 'Forms of Visionary Ascent as Ecstatic Experience in the Zoharic Literature', which appeared in Joseph Dan and Peter Schäfer (eds.), *Gershom Scholem's Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism 50 Years After* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1993), 209–35, but I regret that he neglected to mention the seventh chapter of *Through a Speculum That Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), wherein the argument is laid out in more textual detail. From the latter discussion, moreover, one can discern that I independently argued that underlying the zoharic text is an actual experience of a prophetic nature.
36. Abraham Abulafia, *Mafteaḥ ha-Ḥokhmot* (Jerusalem, 2001), 56–7.
37. Thus, in zoharic parlance, the souls of the people of Israel are referred to as the 'sons of the holy One, blessed be he'. For example, see *Zohar* 1:181b, 3:230a (*Ra'aya Meheimna*).
38. Judah Loew, *Tif'eret Yisra'el*, ed. and annotated Joshua D. Hartman (Jerusalem: Makhon Yerushalayim, 2000), ch. 69, 1087. Goshen-Gottstein, 'Sage', 69–70, cites and briefly discusses Maharal's passage.
39. Byron L. Sherwin, *Mystical Theology and Social Dissent: The Life and Works of Judah Loew of Prague* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1982), 120–2. On Maharal's conception of wisdom, contrasted especially with the perspective of Azariah de Rossi, see André Neher, *Le Puits de l'exil—tradition et modernité: la pensée du Maharal de Prague (1512–1609)*, newly revised and augmented edn. (Paris: Cerf, 1991), 81–94.

40. In the printed text (see following note for reference) there are two readings, both placed in parentheses, *ha-ne'elam* and *ha-olam*, 'the concealed' and 'the world'. I have chosen to translate the former possibility.
41. Judah Loew of Prague, *Ḥiddushei Aggadot* (Jerusalem, 1972), pt. 3, 66.
42. Id., *Tif'eret Yisra'el*, ch. 57, 891.
43. Id., *Gevurot ha-Shem im Haggadah shel Pesaḥ* (Jerusalem, 2003), i. 1.
44. Compare *Tif'eret Yisra'el*, ch. 57, 891.
45. Judah Loew of Prague, *Gevurot ha-Shem*, 1–2.
46. For discussion of the textual variants of this passage, see Ronit Meroz, 'Zoharic Narratives and Their Adaptations'. *Hispania Judaica* 3 (2000): 34–38, 55–58. According to Meroz's reconstruction, the reworking of Ameimar's dictum does not appear in the earliest stratum.
47. On the dilemma regarding the competing impulses to reveal and to conceal mystical secrets, see *Zohar* 1:11b, 2:257b, 3:74b, 127b; Liebes, *Studies*, 34; Elliot R. Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia—Kabbalist and Prophet: Hermeneutics, Theosophy, and Theurgy* (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2000), 23–5.
48. Ḥayyim Volozhyn, *Nefesh ha-Ḥayyim* (Benei Beraq, 1989), 4.20, 254–6.
49. For fuller discussion, see Elliot R. Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond: Law and Morality in Kabbalistic Mysticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 186–285. Liebes, *Studies*, 46–7, discerned an antinomian strand in the distinction between the Torah of *Ze'eir Anpin* (based on judgement and mercy) and the Torah of *Attiqa Qaddisha* (based entirely on love) in the preamble to the *Idra Rabba* section of the *Zohar*. He insists, however, that the notion promoted in this zoharic text, in contrast to the perspective conveyed in the *Ra'aya Meheimna* and *Tiqqunei Zohar*, does not advocate an antinomian supplanting of the Torah based on the distinction between permissible and forbidden with the messianic Torah that is beyond dualities and, consequently, beyond the delimitations of law itself. In *Venturing Beyond*, 214–6, I argue that the gap between the *Idra Rabba* passage and the other zoharic texts is not so great, though I make it clear that my argument turns on substituting the word 'hypernomian' for the word 'antinomian' (215, n. 101).
50. The view embraced by the zoharic author should be compared to the statement made by Maimonides in *Guide of the Perplexed* 3.32 concerning sacrifices and prayer. Several passages in the zoharic anthology attest that the Castilian kabbalists appropriated the contemplative ideal of worship proffered by Maimonides without, however, rejecting the more traditional form of statutory prayer. See Tishby, *Wisdom*, 951–62; Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 291–2, and the more elaborate discussion in id., '*Via Negativa* in Maimonides and its Impact on Thirteenth-Century Kabbalah', *Maimonidean Studies*, 5 (2008), 393–442.
51. On the technical expression 'knot of faith', *qishra di-meheimanuta*, see Yehuda Liebes, *Sections of the Zohar Lexicon*. (Jerusalem: Akkadamon, 1976), 399 [Hebrew].
52. Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond*, 277–83.
53. Tishby, *Wisdom*, 1089–1112; Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Schocken Book, 1969), 66–70;

Pinchas Giller, *The Enlightened Will Shine: Symbolization and Theurgy in the Later Strata of the Zohar* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993), 59–79.

54. Tishby, *Wisdom*, 1109. On the theurgical explication of the commandments in the *Ra'aya Meheimna* and *Tiqqunei Zohar*, see also Charles Mopsik, *Les Grands Textes de la Cabale: les rites qui font Dieu* (Paris: Verdier, 1993), 207–11, and Giller, *Enlightened*, 81–105.
55. Tishby, *Wisdom*, 1111.
56. Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1954), 19–22; id., *On the Kabbalah*, 5–31, 118–57. Tishby, *Wisdom*, 1121, n. 198, duly refers to some of Scholem's work.
57. Tishby, *Wisdom*, 1109.
58. Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond*, 267–77.
59. Amos Goldreich, 'Clarifications of the Self-Understanding of the Author of Tiqqunei ha-Zohar' [in Hebrew], in Michal Oron and Amos Goldreich (eds.), *Massu'ot: Studies in Kabbalistic Literature and Jewish Philosophy in Memory of Prof. Ephraim Gottlieb* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1994), 459–96.
60. Giller, *Enlightened*, 52–3, and references to other scholars cited on p. 146, n. 119.
61. The positing of the three lights, *or penimi qadmon, or meṣuḥṣaḥ*, and *or ṣaḥ*, appears in a thirteenth-century kabbalistic responsum attributed falsely to Hai Gaon, a version of which was included by Moses Cordovero in *Pardes Rimmonim* (Jerusalem, 2000), 11.1, 156–7, and in a slightly better edition in Yael Nadav, 'The Epistle of the Kabbalist R. Isaac Mar Ḥayyim on the Doctrine of the *ṣaḥṣaḥot*' [in Hebrew], *Tarbiz*, 26 (1957), 440–58, esp. 449–53. In that context, the 'three supreme lights' (*me'orot ha-elyonot*) that are above the *sefirot*, and which have no beginning (*ein lahen hatḥalah*), are identified as the 'name and essence of the root of all roots' (*shem wa-eṣem le-shoresh kol ha-shorashim*) that is beyond human comprehension. The three supernal lights, which are described further as the 'one light, essence, and root of the Infinite' (*or eḥad wa-eṣem we-shoresh eḥad le-ein sof*), together with the lower ten *sefirot* that emanate from them correspond to the thirteen divine attributes specified in rabbinic theology. For discussion and partial translation of the pseudepigraphic text, see Gershom Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, trans. Allan Arkush; ed. R. J. Zwi Werblowsky (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 349–52. Scholem surmised the text was written 'by an anonymous personage of Provence, probably around 1230' (p. 349). For a different perspective, see Mark Verman, *The Books of Contemplation: Medieval Jewish Mystical Sources* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992), 114–16. The responsum was also discussed by Georges Vajda, *Recherches sur la philosophie et la kabbale dans la pensée juive du Moyen Ages* (Paris: Mouton, 1962), 179–81.
62. Scholem, *Origins*, 353–4.
63. Giller, *Enlightened*, 39.
64. Tishby, *Wisdom*, 246–7.
65. Ibid. 247–51.

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