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Reification of Language in Jewish Mysticism

MOSHE IDEL

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Rabbi Moses Eliaqim Beriah, the son of the famous Maggid of Kuznitz, started his commentary on the Pentateuch as follows:

Bereshit Bara ect.¹ It is said in the *Tiqqunim*:² [the word] *Bereshit* [is composed of] *Beit Rosh* [House Head] and it seems that this may be explained on the basis of the verse "The stone rejected by the builders, is the selfsame stone that was the cornerstone."³ It is because it is written in *Sefer Yeẓirah* [*Book of Creation*] that the letters are called stones and the words are called houses.⁴ And the person who approaches the [study of] Torah and prayer,⁵ ought to build a house, which is the combinations of letters, filled by illumination and perfection [and] to prepare a Tabernacle⁶ for God, Blessed be He, to dwell there in those words of the prayer. This is the meaning [of the verse] "The stone rejected by the builders," namely the letters, whom the builders, that are the persons who pray, despise them; "This selfsame stone will become a cornerstone."⁷ Those letters that were at the beginning of the creation, God, Blessed be He and His name, . . . He created by them heaven and earth and all their hosts. This is the meaning of the cornerstone, namely [it is] the beginning of the creation of the world, at the moment God turned to this world in order to create it. And the [main] purpose is to reach this level, by his cleaving to the supernal worlds, and thereby he is worthy to

pronounce [his] speech before God in a perfect way and full of illumination. This is the intention of the *Tiqqunim* by positing the combination of letters *House Head*, namely to make a house to the Head that is God, Blessed be He and His name, [so] that He may dwell in the words and the speeches of his Torah and his prayer.⁸

In creation and in ritual, the Hebrew language was considered by Jewish mystics as playing a role much more important than the common communicative one that language regularly plays. It was the main instrument of the creation of the world, and it is the vessel that is prepared by man to contain the divine light that is attracted therein in order to experience an act of union or communion. In both cases, the letters do not serve, in any way, as a channel of transmitting meaning; too powerful an instrument, the letters are conceived of as creative elements that enable different types of communication, a verbal ones, that accomplish much more than merely conveying certain trivial information. Letters are regarded as stones, as full-fledged entities, as components intended to build up an edifice of words to serve as a temple for God and a place of encountering Him for the mystic. After the Temple was destroyed, it was prayer that replaced the sacrifices; according to some important conceptions of Jewish mysticism, Jews constantly rebuild the Temple by their daily prayer and study of the Torah, when performed properly.⁹ As God was able to create a world by means of letters, man is supposed to rebuild the Temple in his ritual usage of language.¹⁰ Initially intended to be performed in the Temple, the ritual is now conceived by Jewish mystics as a means to supply a surrogate for it, in order to reestablish the link with the divine. The “masonic” aspects of the divine and the human activity reveal a hidden and mighty dimension of the Hebrew letters that underlies their mystical conceptions. The letters are understood to constitute a mesocosmos that enables operations that can bridge the gap between the human — or the material — and the divine.¹¹

The sermon of Rabbi Moses Eliaqim is far from exceptional; in my opinion, it is a concise and dense presentation of the common eighteenth-century Hasidic understanding of language, cultivated by this important segment of mystical Judaism. In the following pages, I shall survey the basic understandings of language that culminated in the Hasidic mystical attitude toward language. Mys-

tical interpretations of language are functions of the major mystical interests of the comprehensive system that generate them. Jewish mysticism offers a series of different conceptions of language that correspond to the mystical foci that dominated its various trends. I propose to distinguish between four basic views of language:

1. Language was regarded as instrumental in the process of the creation of the world and as a natural component of reality. This emphasis on the constitutive nature of language is widespread in all forms of Jewish mysticism.
2. Language and its elements reflect, according to another important kabbalistic view, the divine structure by way of symbolism and by virtue of an organic link between the symbol and the object it symbolizes. Consequently, the mystic is able to affect the divine structure by the proper use of language. This approach is characteristic of the theosophical–theurgical Kabbalah, as represented in the *Zohar* and Lurianic Kabbalah. Although this view is dominant in these bodies of literature, traces are to be found also in eighteenth-century Hasidic mysticism.
3. Language, especially its discrete components, is considered to be a technique to attain a mystical experience. This instrumental concept of language is characteristic of those types of Jewish mysticism that focused on ecstatic experiences as an important religious ideal, such as the medieval ecstatic Kabbalah and late Polish Hasidism.
4. Finally, language is considered to be a means by which one can attract or capture the divine in the lower world. This “talismatic” conception has obvious affinities with some aspects of medieval Arabic magic, which entered Kabbalah in fourteenth-century Spain, became important in Cordoverean Kabbalah in Safed, and played a paramount role in Hasidic mysticism.

An obvious common denominator of views 1, 2, and 4 is the assumption that a unique plane exists where language plays a role different from the conventional one it usually plays in ordinary communication. Beyond its informative function, a certain degree of independent reality of language is surmised, this extraordinary level of existence serving variegated purposes. In other words, lan-

guage is ontologized as a preliminary assumption that it can fulfill the purposes posited by the different types of Jewish mysticism. Implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, the ontologized or “reified” conception of language appears also in view 3—overtly in the Hasidic type¹²—and eventually also in ecstatic Kabbalah,¹³ as will soon become clear. Therefore, we may regard Jewish mysticism as viewing language as a reality in itself, generally fraught with divine features, bridging the gap between the corporeal—or the human—plane and the divine plane. We shall first survey these four views and afterward address some related issues.

Letters: The Constitutive Elements of Creation

The biblical conception of creation is commonly described as the *fiat* concept; the major instrument of this alleged biblical view is, according to the *fiat* manner of creation, the divine speech, which calls into being those entities whose names were pronounced *in illo tempore*. A reading of Genesis, however, complicates this simplistic description. The first act of creation is mentioned before any speech of God is related; after the mentioning of creation, it is not self-evident whether each particular speech innovates the particular thing it is related to *ex nihilo* or causes a distinction in the chaotic mass, organizing the particular entity according to the specific structure intended by the divine. It seems that, much more than creating, speech functions in the biblical account of creation as an organizing factor, imposing division and orderliness on chaos.¹⁴

The Talmudic–Midrashic literature offers several different ways of understanding the biblical account. One of them, possibly influenced by Platonic thought, portrays God as consulting Torah as an architectonic model and creating the world according to its pattern. The universe of language, as it was preestablished in the sacrosanct structure of the canon, is the blueprint of the material cosmos. The peculiar arrangement of the linguistic material in the Torah is apparently regarded as compulsory for God Himself. He merely enacts, on another plane and using other material, the content of a preexistent Torah. I would like to emphasize the fact that, according to this view, creation is an act of imposing the inner structure of the Torah on an undefined material. What seems to be

absent from this description is the conception that letters are the raw material out of which the world is going to be created. Its hylic material is not specified, and its "form," to speak in Aristotelian terms, is the language as embodied in the Torah. Interestingly, this presentation of the creation did not specify whether the contemplation of the Torah by God was accompanied by a pronunciation of its content as part of creation. This way of describing the creative process envisions Torah as the paradigm and is especially important for understanding the paramount centrality of Torah in Judaism, more specifically its commandments, whose performance is regarded as safeguarding the existence of heaven and earth.¹⁵

Another version of creation connected to language is expressed, tangentially, in a well-known statement, of utmost importance for our further discussion, according to which Bezalel created the Tabernacle using his knowledge of the way heaven and earth were created by the combination of letters.¹⁶ According to this interpretation of the Talmudic statement, Bezalel was cognizant of this peculiar method of creation—the technique of combination of letters, rather than letters used as raw material—as implied in the interpretation proposed by Scholem.¹⁷ Depicted as the paragon of Jewish artisans, Bezalel was described as uniquely wise, being in the shadow of God. His knowledge of the divine device, based on linguistic technique, enabled him to create the Tabernacle, which is considered second only to the creation of God. The exceptional wisdom of the builder of the Temple, Solomon, is well known; however, even he is not described as being in possession of the combinatory practice that served God. It is important to remark that in this description of creation, it is not clear whether God or Bezalel pronounced the peculiar combination of letters that was involved in the creational process.

The third Midrashic theory regarding linguistic creation depicts God as using divine names. According to one version, He used the letters that form His name in order to create heaven and other letters in order to create earth.¹⁸ Again, it would be unreasonable to assume that these letters entered into the physical constitution of the creation; they are, apparently, the creative forces that served God, rather than the basic elements of the universe. Also, in this description the pronunciation of the divine name is not implied.

The next important theory of linguistic creation, seemingly the

most influential one, argues that the actual pronunciation of the creational words, mentioned in Genesis 1, explains the account of creation.¹⁹ God is sometimes referred to as “He who spoke and the world came to being.” The authors of this view identify in Genesis 1 ten creative words, designated as *ma’amarot*. Interesting mystical speculations stemming from this assumption were to emerge later in a long series of Jewish mystical sources.²⁰

However, the crucial formulation of the linguistic creation that served as the cornerstone of medieval linguistic mysticism in Judaism is to be found in a short treatise that is not part of the classical Talmudic–Midrashic literature. It is *Sefer Yezirah* (*Book of Creation*), which contributed the theory that the letters of the Hebrew alphabet entered the process of creation not only as creative forces but also as the elements of its material structure.²¹ Language, according to this theory, was considered not only the archetype of the world but also its stuff. Another cardinal topic that occurs only in this version of linguistic creation is the description of the formation of the letters of the alphabets from the second *Sefirah*, the pneuma, out of which God has carved the alphabet. After the completion of the twenty-two letters, God combined them in all possible permutations of two letters, as part of the creational process. There is no mention of the Torah as the archetype, nor are the divine names crucial for the understanding of the process of creation in the *Book of Creation*. It is noteworthy that this theory, which focuses on letters and their combinations rather than on the Torah and the divine names, occurs in a work that was composed outside the literary genres characteristic of the Halakic–Midrashic writings. The emphasis on the combinatory theory, which is only hinted at in the Talmudic passage on Bezalel, assumes a certain freedom in the usage of the letters, which are not seen as forming the fixed and sacred combination of the letters in the canonic Torah. Now God is not copying the content of the Torah, transposing it on another plane, but is creating freely. No wonder that this treatise does not touch the topic of commandments; the common Jewish religious concepts are rather marginal in comparison with the cosmogonical elements that pervade the entire book.²²

I described the various versions of the ancient Jewish views of linguistic creation in order to allow a phenomenology of the role of language; when fixed in the specific structures of the Torah and

the divine name, the archetypal role is central and a certain axiology, mostly a religious one, is involved. However, when the letters are mentioned as separate entities, as in the *Book of Creation*, the focus is a certain type of anomic knowledge, a certain type of gnosis that exposes the primordial processes.

In the first type of using language, the difference between the creator and the created is implicit. God transcends the material world, which emerges by an act that is basically different from the nature of the creature. No so in the type of creation as proposed by the *Book of Creation*: the letters enter the constitution of the world and became part of its fabric; God himself is portrayed as immersed in the process of creating the letters and in arranging them in the specific permutations that are the source of each and every created entity. The interest in the specific relationship between each letter and the peculiar astronomical, temporal, and human domain on which it is appointed, so characteristic of the *Book of Creation*,²³ contributed greatly to the process of atomization of language that became manifest in the later stages of Jewish mysticism. Regression—or, if we want, return—from the informative to the magical and mythic nature of language is triggered by the focusing of interest on the single letter as a topic in itself.

Finally, another way of understanding the nature of language, which includes elements central in the two models mentioned above, is to be found in the literature of the *Hekhalot* or the *Mer-kavah*. This ancient Jewish body of literature contributes the theory that the Torah, the divine names, and the alphabet in general are existing, apparently even preexisting, in the divine world as part of the divine retinue, sometimes even as inscribed on the divine body.²⁴ In one particular instance, God is described as comprised in His name, and His name as being in Him.²⁵ Angels are viewed as linguistic entities,²⁶ the divine names being described as having huge dimensions.²⁷ In one of the most important treatises of this literature, each and every letter is a divine name in itself,²⁸ a view that had substantial reverberations in later Jewish mysticism; combined with the *Sefer Yezirah* emphasis on the peculiar nature of individual letters in the creational process, the view of the *Hekhalot* literature provides an important element to the magical understanding of the nature of the Hebrew language. According to a recent study, the *Hekhalot* literature includes a theology of the

divine names that can be arranged hierarchically so as to provide a relatively coherent scheme. The divine pleroma has, according to this theology, conspicuous linguistic characteristics, a fact that considerably reduces the distance between the creator and the creature, their common denominator being the elements of the Hebrew language.²⁹

A primary typology of the various understandings of the creative functions of language seems to emerge from this discussion; letters were seen as energy that may directly trigger the creation when they are pronounced by God, or in their arrangement as Torah, they constitute archetypes of creation. It seems that only in the *Book of Creation* are the letters explicitly considered as the components of the created world.

All the later conceptions of the mystical nature of language are the offshoots of one of these views or a mixture of the various mystical interests presented in some of them.

Language in Theosophical Kabbalah

In the mainstream of Kabbalah, the theosophical–theurgical one, the graphic facet of the letters is considered to symbolize the configuration of the divine attributes, the *Sefirot*. According to a late-thirteenth-century kabbalist:

All the letters of the Torah by their shapes, combined and separated, swallowed letters, curved ones and crooked ones, superfluous and elliptic ones, minutes and large ones, and inverted, the calligraphy of the letters, the open and closed pericopes and the ordered ones — all of them are the shape of God, Blessed be He.³⁰

No wonder that this kabbalist, explicitly referring to the Torah as the picture of the divine, considered any alteration of the shapes of letters in the Torah as distorting the divine image. Another kabbalist in his entourage envisioned the study of the Torah as a way to know the “Supernal Form.”³¹ What transpires from these views is the paramount importance of the visual facet of the alphabet and the special arrangement of the letters in the scroll of the Torah. The encounter with the text consists of not only a study of its meaning, or even infinite meanings, but also a contemplation of its

peculiar formal structure. We are here at the verge of the symbolic conception of a text, or of written language, and at the beginning of the hierogrammatic perception of letters as directly conveying a certain type of content by their very forms. The distance between the symbol and its *signatum* is substantially reduced, if not completely effaced. As Umberto Eco aptly described "the Kabbalistic drift": "Language can be the place where things come authentically to begin: in Heidegger's hermeneutics the word is not 'sign' (Zeichen) but 'to show' (Zeigen)." ³² By this reification of letters, a "deification" of their status is attained.

The previous stand represents a basic conception of theosophical Kabbalah regarding language; Hebrew letters, mainly their visual form, constitute the image of the divine, and this feature bestows, according to the kabbalists, a unique character of holiness on Hebrew texts in general. On this assumption, in the middle of the fourteenth century an anonymous kabbalist composed a classic of kabbalistic literature, *Sefer ha-Temunah (Book of the Image)*, a treatise devoted to a detailed explanation of the theosophical significances of the forms of each and every letter; ³³ all of them were considered to constitute the image of one of the ten *Sefirot*.

The conception of language that dominates the theosophical-theurgical Kabbalah is reminiscent of Platonic thought; both consider the ideal source to be the higher world, whence everything comes down. Indeed, this resemblance indicates a certain historical affinity, which nevertheless seems to be limited. Although language is considered as descending from the high and therefore as having some natural connection with its source, in Kabbalah the function of language differs from what we may have expected in a strictly Platonic universe of discourse. Platonic ideas are conceived of as static entities, as archetypes that, according to Neoplatonic theories, emanate from the lower entities; although the *nexus* between cause and effect does not disappear during the emanative process, the possibility that the lower entity will affect the higher one is not accepted by Platonic or Neoplatonic thinkers. ³⁴ However, according to kabbalistic theosophy, the Sefirotic realm is dynamic, its dynamism prone to being influenced by the deeds of men in the mundane world. Language, as an emanated entity and at the same time as a kind of human activity, was regarded by kabbalists as a major instrument man can use in order to affect the divine. Be-

cause of the correspondence of the various components of language with the supernal powers, the proper use of language may effectively change the processes taking place on high. Consequently, we may define the main function of language in this type of Kabbalah as theurgical; its components reflect the supernal domain while affecting those elements. This impact can be regarded as linguistic theurgy. Basically, the facets of language do not differ from any other entity in the world, all of them being emanated, but due to the flexibility of this medium, and the easy way it may be used by the expert, it represents an appropriate means of exercising an influence above. Let me adduce one instructive passage illustrating this approach to language. According to the sixteenth-century Safedian kabbalist Rabbi Moses Cordovero:

There is no doubt that the letters that compose each and every pericope of the pericopes of the Torah, and every *Gemara* and chapter [*Pereq*] someone is studying, which concern a certain *Mizwah*, have a spiritual reality which ascends and clings to the branches of this sefirah, namely that [peculiar] sefirah that hints to that *Mizwah*, and when the person studies the [corresponding] *Mizwah* or the chapter or the pericope or the verse those letters will move and stir on the high, on this reality [*Meziut*], by the means of a "voice" and a "speech," which are *Tiferet* and *Malkhut* and *Maḥashavah* and *Re'uta deLibba*³⁵ . . . since *Maḥashavah* and *Re'uta deLibba* are like a soul to the "speech" and to the "voice," which are the [lower] soul [*Nefesh*] and the spirit [*Ruah*]. And behold, the voices and the realities of the letters [produced by] the twist of the lips bestow on them a certain act and movement [like that] of a body. And the reality of the letters ascends and it is found everywhere on the way of their ascent from one aspect³⁶ to another, following the way of the [descending] emanation from one stage to another.³⁷

This kabbalistic master presents a comprehensive theory that involves the letters and voices together with their sources in the lower domain of the Sefirotic realm, *Tiferet* and *Malkhut*, and their supernal sources, two higher *Sefirot*, *Maḥashavah* and *Re'uta deLibba*. On the psychological level, they correspond to the two lower spiritual functions. This concatenation of the psychological and linguistic Sefirotic conceptions explains, according to Cordovero, the possibility of affecting the higher *Sefirot* by the ascending

letters. This dynamism of the letters—that is, their ascending capacity and the impact they may have on the various *Sefirot*—stems from the impetus conferred by human thought and will, which correspond to divine thought and will. Intentional speech is an ascending human creation complementing the descending divine speech.³⁸ Although in these instances there is no reason to speak about a dialogue in the Buberian manner, basically here is a dialectic of the relationship between the human and the divine, language serving as a major vehicle, though in some instances only as a metaphor. I would like to emphasize this quality of language because it seems to complement, and perhaps also modify, the way Scholem presented the kabbalistic conception of mystical language as especially focused on nouns. Although in theosophical Kabbalah words and letters do function as symbols, and therefore as nouns, it is their dynamic, flexible quality that is basically significant for the way kabbalists understand the role of language.³⁹ If theosophy contributed to the transformation of language into a body of symbols, it is the theurgical aspect of Kabbalah that changed these symbols into living entities, which possess specific qualities beyond that of representing the higher realities.

As an extension of the divine in the world, a way for man to return to the divine, and a major constituent of the mystical path, language, according to theosophical Kabbalah, encapsulates the role of the instrument. At the same time, it embodies the purpose of the mystical quest, the infinite light that, according to Hasidic texts, dwells in the linguistic material.

Language in Ecstatic Kabbalah and Hasidism

The vocal aspect of language is a vital component of the mystical technique cultivated in the ecstatic Kabbalah. Rabbi Abraham Abulafia, the major exponent of this brand of Jewish mysticism, emphatically distinguishes his type of Kabbalah from the more common one, the Sefirotic Kabbalah, exactly on this ground. The other kabbalists, he assesses,⁴⁰ are undergoing experiences of light, sent down by the divinity, whereas his own Kabbalah is based on the hearing of “speech”—that is, primeval speech—that would be identified by Abulafia with the Agent Intellect of medieval Aristotelian-

ism. The ecstatic kabbalists use linguistic devices, pronunciation of the divine names, in order to attain a basically acoustic experience.⁴¹ The affinity between the technique and the results in both Sefirotic and the ecstatic Kabbalah is obvious. According to the former, a major concern of the kabbalists is the nature of the revealed aspect of the Divinity, the Sefirotic realm; this realm is reflected in the type of experience they underwent, since the light that descends on the mystic is to be related to the ten *Sefirot* understood as translucent or illuminating entities.⁴² The ecstatic kabbalist was interested, from the very beginning, in a more linguistic subject—the divine names—and, as a result, the nature of the experience is related to the nature of the concern and of the technique appropriate to this type of experience. This difference splits the techniques used by those two types of Kabbalah and the results of those techniques, and it is one of the most basic distinctions between the two major brands of Kabbalah. Indeed, Abulafia seems to be the only kabbalist who formulated all the “principles” of Kabbalah in linguistic terminology; his Kabbalah was described as the Kabbalah of Names, and its three principles are “letters,” their “combinations” (*zerufei ’otiot*), and the vowels (*neqqudot*) that are seen as causing the movement of the combinations of letters, which are, actually, purely consonants.⁴³ This brief description of the “divine Kabbalah” evinces the distinctive linguistic feature of the ecstatic Kabbalah in comparison with the Sefirotic one, which seems to emphasize more the meaning of the words as they appear in the canonic text rather than the free, associative combination of letters cultivated by ecstatic Kabbalah. This is not the place to describe the details of the mystical techniques used by Abulafia in order to reach a mystical experience; such a description appears elsewhere.⁴⁴ However, the historical dimension of the practice proposed by Abulafia requires consideration.

The attempt to cultivate a vocal technique and to strive for an auditive response from the divine, or from the Agent Intellect, seems to be a continuation of earlier types of Jewish mysticism—such as the *Hekhalot* literature and Ashkenazi Hasidism, which were more interested in achieving mystical experience than in making theosophical speculations.⁴⁵ Therefore, the vocal aspect of language in Jewish mysticism apparently enjoyed a long history, in conspicuous distinction from the more visual type of mysticism

that, ancient as it is in, for example, the Ezekiel vision, seems to move to the center for a rather shorter period with the emergence of the Sefirotic Kabbalah. If the emanational theories were pernicious for the development of Jewish mysticism, as Scholem noted,⁴⁶ it is vocal mysticism that enabled Jewish mystics to experience revelations, in addition to visions; vocal techniques were instrumental in allowing mystics to receive prophetic messages instead of contemplating the theosophical structures, using techniques centered on the *Sefirot*. As an alternative to the emanational system that centers on metaphysical questions regarding the nature of the *Sefirot*, the ecstatic Kabbalah is much more involved in experience than in the mythology of the divine powers; thus the latter may rescue Kabbalah from the pit of Neoplatonization, which may ontologize, and has ontologized, the theological concepts by projecting them onto the Sefirotic firmament.

Indeed, an important characteristic of the ecstatic Kabbalah and the eighteenth-century Polish Hasidic conceptions of language is the emphasis they put on the emitting aspect of the letters, which is comparable to their concern about the auditory aspect of their mystical conception of language. Generating sounds is considered as important as hearing, and I include in this category even the phenomena of auditory revelations. In the case of Abraham Abulafia, as in those of some other Jewish mystics, mostly in the Maggidic tradition—those mystical phenomena in Kabbalah where the source of inspiration is an angelic mentor⁴⁷—the mystic himself is articulating not only those linguistic elements that form his mystical techniques, but also the linguistic revelations he strives to attain. Although these phenomena have several features in common with automatic speech, it seems that not every instance of revealing through the voice of the mystic is easily reducible to automatism. In the case of pronouncing the sounds that are part of the techniques, we witness a mystical interpretation of a Halakic requirement; according to the Talmudic view, the words of the regular prayers have to be pronounced in a distinct way, so as not to reduce prayer to a mental activity. This basic assumption reverberates in the Hasidic conception of the mysticism of language, barring the mentalistic possibilities that characterize some Jewish mystical phenomena and some non-Jewish types of mystical prayer.

The previous remarks open the way to a comparison between

the positive attitude of Jewish mysticism toward language and the negative conception of language in Christian mysticism. It is language, or languages, that are to be surpassed in order to reach the acme of mysticism, according to a highly influential statement of Saint Augustine.⁴⁸ The mentalistic and introvert mood that characterizes nonlinguistic mystical experiences seems to be exceptional in Judaism. Conceiving Hebrew as the perfect and the divine language, there was no reason to attempt to transcend, attenuate, or obliterate its use. "Generating" Hebrew was understood by some kabbalists and by most of the Hasidic masters not as a hindrance but as a mode of *imitatio Dei*, an assimilation to the divine activity and thus coming closer to Him.⁴⁹ If language is the main way to bridge the gap, or to communicate between God and man, it is the same vehicle that enables man to restore the connection with the divine. Although the Hasidic mystical theologies still indicate the superior state of the "World of Thought" as higher than the "World of Language," both designating divine universes, it is the latter that constitutes the main scene of activity of these mystics.⁵⁰ Let me present one example of this bridging the gap between God and man by means of language:

In the Chapters of *Hekhalot*⁵¹ it is written that when God dwells upon the throne, a fire of silence falls upon the heavenly beings [*hayot*]. It means that when God dwells upon the speeches [of prayer] then a silent fire falls upon the vitality [*hiyut*] of man, namely a great awe . . . and he does not know where he is, and he does not see and he does not hear since the power of [his] corporeality was obliterated. And its meaning is that happy is the king who is praised in his house, so that the body of man will become the house of God, since it is incumbent upon man to pray with all his power so that his corporeality will be obliterated, and he will forget himself. . . . [A]ll this happens in the flash of an instant, as he is in the state of *devequt*, beyond the world of time.⁵²

The concentrated articulation of the words of prayer causes an anesthetic experience, an experience of union during which man transcends time and bridges the distance between God and humanity. Words become the throne on which the deity dwells, ensuring the closest contact between the two entities.

Moreover, the importance of the emission of sounds even at the

revelatory level of mysticism implies an activist attitude that is still maintained when the technical stage has been surpassed. This is obvious in the ecstatic Kabbalah, when the mystic, as part of the revelatory process, is supposed to answer the questions he himself was interested in. Language becomes the instrument of a dialogue, or we may even regard it as a monologue, where the human throat is playing the role of both the human and the divine speakers. In the case of some Hasidic types of linguistic mysticism, the emission of the sounds is considered as creating the vessels wherein the divine influx dwells, or wherein it was attracted, and therefore enables the union or the communion with the "light of the infinite"⁵³ here "below." Whereas the ecstatic Kabbalah implies a two-stage linguistic process, the technical and the revelatory, Hasidic linguistics views the mystical phenomena as taking place during the same linguistic process that is part of ritualistic prayer. In other words, the Hasidic mystic is not so much interested in a dialogic situation, as Buber argued, as in a one-stage process that induces the divine into the humanly created sounds, resulting in *devekut*. Strangely enough, Kabbalah, which was regarded by Buber as a nondialogic type of mysticism,⁵⁴ seems to supply examples of stances where dialogue seems to be more manifest than in Hasidic mysticism.

Oral language in the Hasidic milieu became important precisely because the mystical teachings were transmitted directly by the master to the community or by the master to the disciples, who were supposed to attend the sermons or the lessons of the spiritual leader. But during most of the period when Kabbalah was creative, the few kabbalists were dispersed in several distant centers; living far from one another, they were obliged to communicate and transmit their teachings in ways different from those of the masses of Hasidim, who frequently gathered around their *Zaddiq* in order to hear his speeches. Moreover, the complex theosophical theories of the kabbalists could be better communicated in written form, which allowed the perusal necessary for the digestion of their complexities, whereas the more simple Hasidic teachings could be absorbed when attending a sermon of the *Zaddiq*. Therefore, the turn from the higher evaluation of the written language to the oral one is also the result of a deep sociological restructuring of the European segment of Jewish mysticism, which implies also a reevaluation of the already existing theories, preferring the ecstatic Kabbalah over

the theosophical Kabbalah as far as their conception of language is concerned. Let me turn now to the last of the important views of language in Jewish mysticism, which indeed emphasized the centrality of the articulated form of the letters.

The Talismatic Conception of Language

Language was, finally, conceived to be not only an important avenue of expression, a great symbol, an instrument of creation, but also a talismatic entity. In several kabbalistic sources in the medieval Spanish Kabbalah, the Hebrew letters were understood to be vessels into which the divine influx could be captured and used in a certain way. Basically, it is a magical perception of language, more accurately of its components, the pronounced letters. Although similar to the Hermetic and Neoplatonic magic of late antiquity,⁵⁵ language, as envisioned by the fifteenth-century kabbalists, was a self-sufficient instrument that could be influential even without adding the complementary rites and materials that are characteristic of pagan magic.⁵⁶ The development of this talismatic interpretation of language is a very complex one, and it cannot be described in this context; I would like to mention here only the most important stages of this approach to language and offer some examples.

The first clear-cut instance of this understanding of language occurs in the writings of an early-fifteenth-century Spanish kabbalist, Rabbi Shem Tov ben Shem Tov. In his *Sefer ha-Emunot*, a work ignored by the fifteenth-century Kabbalah but important in the sixteenth century, Shem Tov indicates that voice letters were formed from Moses and that these letters "are like a body to the inner, spiritual and holy intellects, the names of God, which are like drawing deep waters by means of a vessel: so was Moses drawing by his form [*zurato*], by the means of that voice, the innerness of the intellects . . . the building of the letters, which are vessels of the inner intellects."⁵⁷

Under the influence of this work, some Safedian kabbalists elaborated on Shem Tov's conception, the most important of them being Rabbi Moses Cordovero. In a highly influential compendium of Kabbalah, *Pardes Rimmonim*, Cordovero asserts that "the Prayer using mystical intentions [*Kavvanah*] has to draw the spiri-

tual force from the supernal level downwards into the letters he [the prayer] is pronouncing so as to be able to elevate those letters up to the supernal level, in order to fasten his request."⁵⁸

Cordovero describes the letters as containers of the influx attracted from above by the mystical intention of the prayer, this attraction enabling the ascent of the letters to their source on high, in order to attain his request. Here letters are regarded as vehicles of the intention of the mystic, who is able to infuse in them the supernal force. Since the propagation of the Cordoverian Kabbalah, mostly through the printing of *Pardes Rimmonim* with its commentaries, and indirectly by the books of Cordovero's disciples, the talismatic conception of language became widespread, its most important impact being the Hasidic conception of letters as "palaces"—that is, "places"—where the mystic who pronounces the holy sounds thereby captures the divine presence.⁵⁹

At the end of the fifteenth century, seemingly without any direct relation to *Sefer ha-Emunot*, the same view is found in the writings of Rabbi Yohanan Alemanno, a Renaissance figure who expressed it several times in his works; one interesting example will suffice in order to demonstrate the affinity of Alemanno's views to that of the Spanish kabbalists. Speaking, like Cordovero later would, on prayer, the Italian kabbalist wrote on the prayer of the simpletons: "[These prayers] receive the influxes which descend onto them because of the existence of human voices, which are arranged [i.e., the letters] in such a manner, that they are worthy of receiving the influxes, which are ready to descend upon them, even if the performer does not prepare them with [the proper] intention."⁶⁰

With Hasidism, the magical implications of this view were sometimes attenuated, though not totally obliterated. As a mystical means, language enables the Hasid to reach an experience of *devekut*, or communion, and sometimes even union, with the divine light that is present in the pronounced letters. According to a tradition in the name of the Besht, "the main purpose of the study of the Torah and of the prayer is to cleave to the innerness of the spiritual force⁶¹ of the light of the *Eyn Sof*⁶² which is in the pronounced letters of Torah and prayer."⁶³

Language, in the form either of prayer or of the loud study of Torah, was transformed from an instrument for achieving a type of relationship to God in a personal way, as Buber would have us believe, into the main avenue for mystical experience.

Monadic and Emanative Conceptions of the Letters

Already in the ancient Jewish mystical sources we find the view that each and every letter is a divine name in itself.⁶⁴ This view was reiterated by a series of mystic authors throughout the Middle Ages, testifying thereby to its importance.⁶⁵ I would like to deal here with the kabbalistic metamorphosis of this view. According to one of the earliest kabbalists, the Provençal author Rabbi Isaac the Blind:

In each of the letters all the [other] letters are [inherent]. However each of them has an essence of itself. And all the ten *sefirot* are [present] in each and every letter . . . since how may they be combined if each of them does not comprise everything; for example in *Alef* the first ten *sefirot* . . . and in each of them [there were] a resemblance of essences, fine and subtle, hidden and comprehending everything that will originate from them, there was there [just] as all the generations were in Adam. So was in each letter.⁶⁶

The whole divine universe and all the future creations are present in each and every letter. Following the teaching of Rabbi Isaac, Rabbi Jacob ben Sheshet, a kabbalist from Catalonia, describes the letters as the archetypes of creation: "The essence of the letters is that they are the forms of all the creatures,⁶⁷ and there is no form which has not a likeness in the letters or in the combination of two or three of them or more."⁶⁸

Ben Sheshet goes on to say that every letter hints at the divinity. The emergence of the letters is described by the kabbalists as an inner process in the divine pleroma, as part of the process of emanation, mostly the transition from the *Sefirah* of *Hokhmah* to that of *Binah*. Following this understanding of the divine revelation as the articulation of the inarticulated through the emergence of the letters, the same kabbalist proposes an interesting manner of imitating God. According to ben Sheshet, the Talmudic imperative to articulate the words of prayer is meaningless if its intention was merely to pronounce the words; God knows even the hidden things so He does not need the act of pronunciation in order to understand the intention of the prayer.⁶⁹ However, ben Sheshet continues, it is incumbent to worship God according to "what He is, namely to generate all the forms [*lezayyer kol ha-zurot*], as it is written,⁷⁰ "There is no Rock like our Lord."⁷¹

According to this conception, the inner mental process, since it seems to be only a potential state, cannot be completed by the act of articulation. Language, that is to say, not only is a means of expression, an inferior form of externalized thought, as the medieval philosophers considered the relation between “inner speech” — reason — and “outer speech,”⁷² but also is thought on its creative level. According to another statement of this kabbalist, letters contain everything that can be spoken of, since no issue can be expressed unless we use letters.⁷³ This assessment assumes that only the expression of thought, not thought itself, is dependent on the letters. This understanding of the language–thought relationship is evidently different from the expression Scholem gives to language as the “mother of thought.”⁷⁴ On the contrary, as we shall see, thought finds its expression in the articulate language, envisioned as the lowest stage of the Sefirotic realm.

The aforementioned ideas, developed at the very beginning of the Kabbalah, have laid the foundation of the symbolic-monic conception of letters as composing the whole reality. This is the reason for the appearance of a new literary genre, the mystical commentaries on the form of the letters, an endeavor to decode the theosophical significance of the letters. Beginning with the *Book of Bahir*,⁷⁵ and until the end of the thirteenth century, there are several commentaries on this issue that betray a profound interest in the hidden content of the letters.⁷⁶ In other words, the Hebrew letters were now seen as hieroglyphs because of their intrinsic value, which transcends any communicative function characteristic of the regular function of letters.⁷⁷

Following the emanational scheme of theosophical Kabbalah, the early kabbalists focused their discussions on the passage from the *Sefirah* of *Hokhmah*, the locus of the undifferentiated letters, to that of *Binah*, where the letters emerge as full-fledged entities. Indeed, this *Sefirah* is also symbolized by the symbol of language.⁷⁸ However, in the late thirteenth century, the kabbalists completed the description of the emanational process using linguistic symbolism. So, for example, Rabbi Moses de Leon, an important Castilian kabbalist, conceived by modern scholarship as the true author of the *Zohar*, envisaged the third *Sefirah* as the place of the expansion of hidden thought — in other words, the emanation of the *Sefirah* of *Hokhmah*⁷⁹ — but at the same time the *Sefirah* of *Binah* is

considered to be a "great voice" (*Qol gadol*), which is—paradoxically enough—identical with the "subtle and inner voice" (*Qol Daq Penimi*) mentioned in the revelation to Isaiah.⁸⁰ *Binah* is the place of transition of thought into the very beginning of speech. The more articulated speech symbolizes, however, the subsequent stages of the Sefirotic world. According to de Leon, "the fine voice" is transformed into an audible entity as it descends from the third to the sixth *Sefirah*, that of *Tiferet*.⁸¹ There alone the hidden thought begins its metamorphosis into an intelligible linguistic phenomenon. Although still meaningless, this voice is the substratum, or the hylic matter, of the speech itself, *Dibbur*, which is represented by the tenth *Sefirah*, *Malkhut*. Only with this last *Sefirah*, which completes the emanational process, is articulated speech generated.⁸² The entire emanation takes place between "Thought" and "Speech." Whereas the starting point of emanation is the totally hidden realm, imperceptible even to human thought, the final point is the place where revelation takes place, where the distinct formulations emerge. This seems to be the significance of the correspondence of the level of the inarticulated voice, identical with the *Sefirah* of *Tiferet*, with the Written Torah, whereas Speech corresponds to the Oral Torah.⁸³ This later corpus is considered in Judaism as the most explicit form of revelation in comparison with the Written Torah, whose ultimate meaning is accessible solely through the agency of the Oral one. The superiority of the oral to the written, which reflects at the same time the superiority of the audible to the seen, is to be understood as refracting the needs of the mundane realm; on the supernal plane, the vision of the Torah is sometimes preferred as the most important one, as the mystical descriptions of Abraham Abulafia, Isaac of Acre, and Shem Tov ibn Gaon testify. Moses was portrayed as copying from a written book, the primordial Torah, which, as the Midrashic sources indicate, was the source of the contemplation by God when He created the world. Even higher is the primordial Torah as understood by the kabbalists, which is identical to the Divine wisdom and, as such, is an infinite entity.⁸⁴

Human speech is considered to be the starting point of the mystical ascent; the journey to the occult is possible, a theosophical kabbalist would assert, only by understanding that Hebrew and its contents are expressions of the hidden entities. The mystic must,

according to this type of mysticism, transcend articulated speech in order to reach the highest levels of the divine, but this fact does not imply a negative attitude toward language. Far from being the predecessors of Ludwig Wittgenstein's suggestion to transcend language, viewed as a ladder, the kabbalists considered their mystical contemplation as a recurring event, which must occur time and again with language, texts, and ritual as indispensable starting points. Although phenomenologically different from the ecstatic Kabbalah, the theosophical Kabbalah strives to surpass the common experience governed by informative language in favor of a monadic perception of letters, the ultimate meaning of which is the destruction of our language. The effort of the theosophical kabbalist to reach the level of the third *Sefirah*, where letters are stored as distinct entities, is similar to the technique employed in the ecstatic Kabbalah, where the final stage of dealing with language is the contemplation of single letters as worlds in themselves. Coming to that point, the kabbalist approaches the state of God who began the creational acts with distinct letters that entered a certain type of combination. Escaping the lower world is tantamount to the escape of the conventional usage of language that is representative of the articulated forms of existence.

According to Rabbi Abraham Adrutiel's *Avnei Zikkaron*,⁸⁵ a kabbalistic treatise compiled at the beginning of the sixteenth century in North Africa, each and every letter of the Tetragrammaton includes or hints at, or both things simultaneously, the names of several angels, which are specified in the discussions referring to the various *Sefirot*. The author, apparently following the views of the famous kabbalistic book *Brit Menuḥah*, put into practice the theory found in the ancient sources that each letter is a divine name, though he seemingly limited himself to the elaboration of the angelic names he could extract from the letters of the divine name alone.

Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Vitebsk, one of the most mystically adept masters of early Hasidism, combined Lurianic concepts with pre-Lurianic views in order to account for the appearance of the Hebrew language in the primeval processes of creation. He asserted that

the totality of the *Zimzum* is [formed of] the letters, and from my flesh I shall see God;⁸⁶ just as a person will contemplate at

the beginning of his thought, [and] it roams and does not rest at all, and the vitality [is running] in an intermittent manner, divesting itself from a form and assuming another, all [these forms] are the form[s] of the letters. Since it is impossible to grasp thought without letters, without them thought is simple, and in its great simplicity it is incomprehensible and it is not designatable as thought, [only] by the concentration of its simplicity does it divest a form and assume the form of other letters. Wisdom⁸⁷ is a crucible. Then he understands something by his understanding, and Knowledge⁸⁸ is revealed, which was hidden and it preponderates between Wisdom and Understanding. After the revelation [i.e., emergence] of Knowledge, the attributes of Love and Judgment⁸⁹ emerge. . . . [s]ince the quintessence of Knowledge is to preponderate and combine the two into one, this is the reason why Knowledge is referred to as the Holy Language, since it preponderates between Wisdom, which is called Holiness, and the preponderating entity is called Language.⁹⁰

The appearance of articulate letters at the very first stage of intellection indicates the linguistic nature of any concrete mental activity. Only after the concretization of diffuse thought into forms—that is, letters—are the more advanced forms of apprehension possible. Then the vocal form of language appears, as the reference to language testifies.

Let us compare this basic view of language articulated by theosophical Kabbalah with that propounded by Lurianic Kabbalah. The Lurianic notion of contraction is applied here to the process of passing from the mental, prelinguistic stages to linguistic activity, the former being conditioned by the latter. At the same time, this process is presented as symbolizing the emanational event in the bosom of the Divinity, all the above concepts conspicuously indicating the gradual emanation of the *Sefirot* in the line presented by classical Kabbalah. However, in comparison with the text of Rabbi Jacob ben Sheshet, and with similar stands in the *Zohar*, the emergence of letters precedes the beginning of the emanational process; it is not merely one stage of it. Rabbi Menaham Mendel, using the Lurianic concept of *Zimzum* and the Sarugian concept of *Malbush* (the garment constituted by combinations of letters that precede emanation⁹¹), not only propels language to a higher ontological plane than classical Kabbalah, but also proposes a different

psychology by elevating letters—in the vein Scholem envisioned the kabbalistic perception of language—to the level of the strictly necessary elements of any mental activity.

For reasons already noted in this essay, a turn from a preference for the written to the oral took place. One of the most articulate expressions of this shift was that of Rabbi Levi Isaac of Berditchev, who mentioned the classical kabbalistic works dealing with the forms of the letters, such as the anonymous book of *Temunah*, the views of Rabbi Isaac Luria, and even the view of the Besht, whose discussion of the mystical significance of the forms of letters is not explored in other sources. After listing this impressive array of authority regarding the mystical interpretations of the forms of the written letters, the Hasidic master indicates that

it is known that there is an image of the letters as it appears in a book. And there is the language of the speaker, who speaks what is written in the book. And the image of the letters as written in the book is [tantamount] to the world of making, the world of nature since they have a limit and an image whereas the language of the speaker who speaks what it is written in the book, his very speech is spiritual, something that has no limit and it corresponds to the world of Thought.⁹²

The axiological principle inherent in this description is clear to anyone cognizant of the kabbalistic and Hasidic ontology; the world of making is the lowest one in the hierarchy of the four worlds, whereas the world of thought is the highest one. Indetermination is the central characteristic of human speech in comparison with the limited nature of written expression. Speech is spiritual in comparison with the natural—that is, the material—world. It is possible that we witness here a conclusion drawn from the early kabbalistic description of the vowels as the spirit that dwells in the consonants.⁹³ If the consonants are the sole letters expressed in written form, the vowels are regularly not committed to writing. Implicitly, the vocalized version of the Bible was, however, considered by kabbalists like Rabbi Jacob ben Sheshet, Rabbi Joseph Gikatilla, and Rabbi Joseph of Hamadan as the articulated and therefore limited form of the Bible, whereas the unvocalized form of this book—the way in which it is written in the scrolls of the

Torah—was considered as the unlimited, actually the infinite form of the Bible.⁹⁴ It seems that the Hasidim regarded the articulated expression as more spiritual than—and therefore superior to—the written one.

I assume that there is a certain relationship between an elaborated theosophy, which consists of a complex hierarchy of divine powers, and the understanding of language that sees in language a series of symbolic meanings that relates each and every linguistic element to a specific aspect or level of the intradivine realm. However, the plethora of symbolic meanings that is characteristic of the theosophical–theurgical Kabbalah vanished in other types of Jewish mysticism that later emerged. To the extent that the theosophical system has lost its centrality or was, sometimes, totally obliterated, the symbolic feature of language became marginal. That is the case in ecstatic Kabbalah and in Hasidism, where language serves more as a ladder to reach the divine in a unitive experience and less to contemplate It or decode Its structure. Language, when retreating from its symbolic function in one brand of Kabbalah, commenced another career playing a more technical role, similar to the role language plays in Hindu and Muslim mysticism. The magical nature of language becomes more and more conspicuous as the divine realm becomes simpler: in ecstatic Kabbalah, the Aristotelian theology was dominant, this type of Kabbalah viewing God as the supreme intellect; in Hasidic mysticism, a more personal theological conception became prevalent, though some important features of the theosophical Kabbalah were still influential. As those types of theology came in lieu of the complex theosophy of the Sefirotic Kabbalah, it was natural to simplify the whole symbolic system that transformed the language of the sources in a radical way. The magical role of language is obvious, since it functioned not as a means of expressing the mystical experience of the mystics, but as a means of showing the way to attain such an experience. Language was conceived as a *preparatio experientis* rather than as its expression. Meaning, not only in its symbolic aspect but also in its common informative function, was attenuated as the discrete components of language were invested with a surplus of meaning. While the separate letters were more likely to be regarded as polivalent morphemes, interest in the entire word

waned. In these types of theologies, the conventional or informative function of language disintegrated as individual letters were conceived of as monads consisting of an infinity of meanings.

The Ascent of Letters

A recurring idea in some ancient and medieval Jewish texts is that the words of prayer pronounced by the people of Israel are ascending on high and there are transformed by the angel Sandalfon into a crown of the Divinity.⁹⁵ This ascent is understood as embellishing the divine pleroma and confers on this ritual a peculiar importance as a theurgical operation, an act that affects the divine realm. Commonly, this view refers to entire words and reflects the desire to strengthen the importance of performing the prayers exactly as they are required by the liturgical canon.⁹⁶ According to medieval versions of this idea, mostly in Ashkenazi Hasidism, the divine name formed of forty-two letters takes the place of the words of prayer in the earlier texts.⁹⁷ The two versions, similar as they are, reflect differing spiritual concerns. According to the second view, what is portent is not the meaning of our acts—that is, the significance of our words—but the magical power inherent in the letters of the divine name.

With the emergence of Kabbalah, another possibility inherent in still more ancient views was exploited: the individual letters became the object of meditative activity. Although these letters are part of the canonic liturgy, kabbalistic prayer, according to several kabbalistic texts, has to concentrate on the symbolic meaning of each and every letter—that is, on the Sefirotic significance of a specific letter. Moreover, each letter is to be visualized in a certain color that corresponds to a Sefirotic force on high.⁹⁸ This concentration of the spiritual force of prayer gives a certain ontological status to the letter, which is conceived of as ascending to the divine world in the way Cordovero had already indicated. In other words, the pronunciation of the letter is to be accompanied by the production of the form of the letter in a certain color and the projection of this imaginary form into the divine realm. The view of the late-thirteenth-century kabbalists—who subscribed to the conception that mystical prayer involves visualization of the letters, mostly

the Tetragrammaton, which subsequently will ascend to the divine realm — underwent an important change after the Safedian Kabbalah. Beginning with Cordovero, kabbalists began another mystical understanding of the ascent of the words of prayer on high. Although still accepting the visualization technique, Cordovero emphasized the importance of the vocal aspects of the letters of the prayers. By emitting the sounds of the word of prayer, the kabbalist attracts the supernal influx onto the material substratum created by the pronunciation of the letters. By the impetus of the spirituality of this influx, the words ascend to the *Merkavah* or, according to other texts, to the various Sefirotic stages, and they affect the transmission of the influx in accordance with the request of the prayer. Thus we witness a twofold motion caused by the generation of the vocal aspect of language: the first one is the quality inherent in the sounds to attract the flow descending from above. As mentioned earlier, words are viewed as temples or palaces where the divine power is supposed to come to dwell. The second move is the ascending one, the elevation of the sounds by the force of the divine that has descended. Finally, a third motion, now independent of language, is causing the channeling of the flow in accordance with the request of the prayer. In the first two stages, language functions as a material substratum that is transformed into an entity that affects the divine.

The implications of the shift from the emphasis on visualization to pronunciation are numerous, and they cannot be presented here. It is sufficient to mention the most important one, the possibility of presenting the mystical prayer as a desideratum for popular circles and not an esoteric technique practiced by the few — that is, by an elite. Indeed, it is this transformation that reinstated the importance of the vocal aspect of language — and not mental or imaginary constructs — as the center of mystical activity, thus enabling the dissemination of Hasidism as a mystical movement. Although this novel approach to prayer, and implicitly to the status of language, was initiated by Cordovero, it seems that the importance of the recitations of the divine names in ecstatic Kabbalah was instrumental in the formation of the new direction.⁹⁹ However, whereas Abulafia posited the vocal performance of the recitation on a level higher than the combination of the letters in written form, at the same time he posited the mental combination of the

letters as higher than their combination orally. With Cordovero, the importance of the mental activity seems to have been attenuated in comparison to Abulafia, this attenuation affecting the subsequent development of Jewish mysticism. Language, in Abulafia's view, does not represent the divine graphically, as the classical kabbalists would assess, but is seen as the locus of the encounter between humanity and the divine. The descent of the divine presence facilitates also the mystical contact with the divine.¹⁰⁰ *Devequt*, the experience of communion or union with the divine, became dominant in Hasidism, and the importance of the mystical quality of the ritualistic sounds was instrumental in Hasidism's renewed emphasis on mystical experience, as we have seen in the citation in the name of the Besht.

Interestingly, mystical prayer returned to the vocal dimension, which seems to have been crucial in the ancient mystical sources that form the *Hekhalot* literature and which was canonized by the Halakhic regulations. In the mystical sources, the mystic—the person who undertook the dangerous ascent to the divinity—was doing it while he was reciting the hymns and the divine names that function both as protective means and as a certain type of vehicle to ensure the ascent.¹⁰¹ As far as we can determine, the graphic facet of the letters was not employed in the techniques of *Hekhalot* literature, as it was later utilized by medieval kabbalists, and the return to the importance of the recitation of liturgical texts in Hasidism, including in this category the Hasidic conception of the study of the Torah, is reminiscent of the centrality of this phenomenon in ancient Jewish mysticism.

Already in an early important document of Hasidism—the epistle of the Besht, Rabbi Israel Ba'al Shem Tov, to his brother-in-law, Rabbi Gershon of Kutov—the letters of prayer are conceived as ascending on high, and the Besht recommends integrating one's soul into those letters in order to attain an experience of cleaving with the divine.¹⁰² Let me conclude this part of our discussion by citing Rabbi Meshullam Phoebus of Zbaraz, a Hasidic master who wrote in the second half of the eighteenth century:

The quintessence of the intention to study [Torah] is identical to that of the intention of prayer: The soul cleaves to, and comes nearer to God, Blessed be He, by [he means of] the letters of the

Torah. Then the letters ascend, and likewise the vapors, up to God, Blessed be He, and He has a great pleasure in it.¹⁰³

Letters become entities that enable the mystic to come in direct contact with the divine in the mundane world, while at the same time they are viewed as vehicles for an ascent to the divine in the transcendental world. They serve as intermediaries for contact with the immanent and transcendent divine.

Hebrew as a Vehicle of Intellectual and Mystical Knowledge

According to a view expressed in a work of ecstatic Kabbalah, the holy language is tantamount to the efflux originated by the divine presence, the *Shekhinah*. Rabbi Isaac of Acre wrote in his mystical diary that

the holy language comes onto the souls of the mystics of Israel from the radiance of the glory of the *Shekhinah*. And before the generation of the Tower of Babel, there was only the holy language alone, as it is said: And all the earth was [speaking] one language and the same words. And understand that “language” is the secret of *Shekhinah*, and “words” allude to the divine name formed of 72 [units] whose letters are 216.¹⁰⁴

The secrets hinted at in this text are the numerical equivalencies of the words language, *Safah*, and *Shekhinah*, both of which total, according to their numerical value, 385. Thus the linguistic material of the Hebrew is tantamount to the intellectual forms that flow from the divine presence. Speaking Hebrew is, accordingly, the corporeal articulation of the divine overflow. Now so much a creation of the human vocal organs, Hebrew emanates from above. Apparently, this kabbalist has in mind a rabbinic dictum, whose sources are rather obscure, that states that “*Shekhinah* spoke from the throat of Moses.” This conception differs from the understanding of Hebrew as divine because of its origin as a creation of God. It is divine because it flows from the divine realm onto the mystic, and the speaking of this language may possibly be understood also as experiencing the presence of the divine. We witness an attempt to ontologize the language by comparing it to, and even identifying it with, the Neoplatonic emanation that descends on the mundane

realm. Actually, Jewish Neoplatonic thinkers, such as Solomon Ibn Gabirol and Isaac Ibn Latif, and some theosophical kabbalists, such as Rabbi Jacob ben Sheshet, had already compared the emanative process to the emission of speech;¹⁰⁵ however, for them this comparison was, apparently, only a simile, whereas for Rabbi Isaac of Acre this metaphor was exploited in order to view language as an overflow descending on the souls of the mystics of Israel.

No wonder that ecstatic kabbalists regarded the knowledge of the principles of kabbalistic linguistics as the core of Kabbalah; according to Abraham Abulafia, "whoever does not know the combinations of letters and is a very 'examined' and experienced person in this lore, and in the counting of letters and their division and in the changing of their order and permutations according to what is written in the *Book of Creation*, does not know the Lord, according to our way."¹⁰⁶

The kabbalist distills the content of the language that reaches us from above by using exegetical principles of the linguistic Kabbalah, and in this way ensures the knowledge of God. Just as the knowledge of the philosophers constitutes the reception of the intellectual overflow from above and its transformation into distinct statements with metaphysical significance, the kabbalist uses his "superlogical" exegetical techniques in order to attain another, higher, type of connection with God, an experiential one that is achieved through the permutation of letters.¹⁰⁷

The preceding discussion affirms that the dispersion of languages at the Tower of Babel is to be obliterated in order to reach the messianic age; based on hints in biblical verses, Abulafia maintains that the coming of the Messiah will change all the languages into one, and the nations will worship God together. This is a normative view, to be found in many postbiblical Jewish texts. However, it is reasonable to assume that such a statement meant much more when it was articulated by someone who considered himself to be the Messiah.¹⁰⁸ By the unification of languages into one, I assume that Abulafia means that his Kabbalah will serve as a means for the attainment of this ideal state of things; as he indeed did in his extant works, this kabbalist considers the linguistic material to be found in the languages of the Gentiles to be a distortion of the original Hebrew, the primordial intellectual language that is a powerful means of worshiping God.¹⁰⁹

Abulafia's view of language found its way to a number of indi-

viduals active during the Renaissance; it reverberates in the works of Rabbi Yohanan Alemanno, the companion of Pico della Mirandola. In a highly interesting passage dealing with the relationship of the biblical Joseph to Pharaoh, probably an allegory of his own situation in comparison with Pico's, Alemanno asserts that notwithstanding either the Egyptian ruler's great wisdom or his familiarity with seventy languages, Pharaoh was unable to master Hebrew, though he made attempts to learn this language "artificially." His failure is due to the fact that the knowledge of Hebrew has a prophetic quality, which is reserved to Jews alone. Alemanno, following the lines of Abulafia's theories, understood the very usage of Hebrew as fraught with mystical value.¹¹⁰ No doubt this emphasis on the knowledge of Hebrew was, in the case of Abulafia, connected to his messianic and prophetic pretensions, which conditioned the attainment of higher experiences with the usage of Hebrew by the ancient Jewish prophets, and the assumption that at the end of days Hebrew will become the unique language of mankind. It seems that this language preserved for certain types of Jewish mystics the essential role of the "divine thing," that very particular core of Jewish being posited by Rabbi Judah Ha-Levi, or again that peculiar Jewish "soul" referred to in the mystical anthropology of Rabbi Joseph Gikatilla. Accordingly, the Jews were the repository of a uniquely powerful instrument whose use ensured a mystical status unattainable otherwise.¹¹¹

As we have seen, the written form of the letters in the scroll of the Torah was regarded by the theosophical kabbalists as the avenue by which to apprehend the form of the divine pleroma; again, a certain type of knowledge transpires behind the very formal structure of language, bestowing on it a surplus of information concerning issues that transcend the common contents of the intrahuman communicative role of language.

Some Mystical Conceptions of Language in the Twentieth Century

At the final stage of this study, I would like to comment briefly on the attitude toward language of some leading figures in modern mysticism, both as mystics and as scholars and thinkers. One of the most picturesque figures in the last generation was Rabbi David

ha-Kohen, the prophet who flourished in the land of Israel. His most important work, *Qol ha-Nevu'ah (The Voice of Prophecy)*, constitutes a detailed survey of the most important Jewish texts that support his main thesis: that speech, much more than vision, was the channel of revelation in Judaism. This survey, which seems to have personal implications regarding the mystical life of ha-Kohen, is an impressive collection of texts that invites a more meticulous and subtle analysis, but nevertheless demonstrates the basic thesis of the centrality of hearing over seeing in Judaism.

Two other important figures—Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig—emphasized the importance of the auditive part of the Hebrew Bible, and they attempted, in their joint project of translation of the Bible into German, to put into sharp relief this aspect of the translated text.¹¹² It seems probable that at least Buber was sensitive to this facet of the text, given his study of Hasidism.

Their contemporary Gershom Scholem, however, was much more impressed by the written form of language; in a letter of his, published recently, he expresses fears regarding the transformation of Hebrew, a sacred language, into a spoken tongue. As early as the late 1920s, he predicted that this shift, which turned the ancient language into a vernacular, would have bizarre repercussions, since this “resurrected” language would haunt those who used it without being aware of the entire range of religious significance immanent in a sacred language.¹¹³ It seems that Scholem, a famous scholar of Kabbalah, preferred the written over the oral form of language, under the influence of the classical kabbalistic axiology concerning language, as we have tried to explain it in this essay.¹¹⁴

Notes

1. Genesis 1: 1.

2. These are the consonants of the word *Bereshit* (In the Beginning). The whole treatise named *Tiqunei Zohar* is a plethora of interpretations of the various meanings of the significances of these consonants. See, for example, *Tiqunei Zohar*, ed. R. Margaliot (Jerusalem, 1978), fol. 24a, *Tiqun VII*.

3. Psalms 118: 22.

4. See *Sefer Yezrah* 4,4. Compare with R. Zeev Wolf of Jhitomir, *Or ha-Meir*, fol. 5b–d.

5. These two activities are envisioned by Hasidism as almost identical, since the Hasidim emphasized, as we shall see, the importance of the vocal acts for their linguistic mysticism. See the quotation with note 63 of this chapter and *Or ha-Meir*, fol. 5c.

6. In Hasidic literature, the word *Mishkan* was seen as the locus of the divine presence; the term *Teivah* means in Hebrew both the word and the actual ark where the scroll of the Torah is deposited. This double meaning was exploited several times by Hasidic authors. See, for example, the quotation in the name of R. Israel Ba'al Shem Tov, in R. Abraham Hayyim of Zlotchov, *Orah Le-Hayyim* (Jerusalem, 1960), fol. 98a; and *Or ha-Meir*, fol. 5bc, 248ab.

7. Psalms 118: 22.

8. R. Moses Elioqim Beriah, *Qohelet Moshe* (Lublin, 1875), fol. 8a.

9. M. Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven, Conn., 1988), pp. 53–54.

10. See note 6.

11. The phrase '*Olam ha-Otiot* (the world of the letters), which mediates between the Sefirotic world and the material one. See M. Idel, "The Magical and Neoplatonic Interpretations of the Kabbalah in the Renaissance," in B. D. Cooperman, ed., *Jewish Thought in the Sixteenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass., 1983) p. 235, n. 95, and *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics in Abraham Abulafia* (Albany, N.Y., 1988), p. 132, n. 1.

12. See note 6 and the words of R. Menahem Mendel of Vitebsk, quoted on pp. 62–63.

13. Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics in Abraham Abulafia*, chap. 1.

14. Such a view, apparently, occurred in Egyptian thought. See John A. Wilson, "Egypt," in H. Frankfort, H. A. Frankfort, J. A. Wilson, T. Jacobsen, and W. A. Irwin, eds., *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man* (Chicago, 1964), pp. 59–60.

15. See *Avodah Zarah*, fol. 3a, and Idel, *Kabbalah*, p. 171.

16. *Berakhot*, fol. 55a. See also E. Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs*, trans. I. Abrahams (Jerusalem, 1979), p. 197.

17. G. Scholem, "The Name of God and the Linguistic of the Kabbala," *Diogenes* 79 (1972): 71.

18. See, for example, the tradition mentioned by R. Jacob ben She-shet, *Sefer ha-Ermonah ve-ha-Bittahon*, in D. Chavel, *Kitvei ha-Ramban* (Jerusalem, 1964), vol. 2, p. 363, and Urbach, *Sages*, pp. 197–98.

19. Urbach, *Sages*, pp. 197–213.

20. See Idel, *Kabbalah*, pp. 112–22.

21. Scholem, "Name of God," pp. 72–74.

22. See Scholem, *Kabbalah* (New York, 1974), pp. 23–26.

23. See Chapter 5.

24. See M. Idel, "The Concept of the Torah in Heikhalot Literature and Its Metamorphosis in Kabbalah" (in Hebrew), *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 1 (1981): 43–45.

25. Idel, "Concept of the Torah," p. 67.

26. M. Idel, "The World of Angels in Human Form" (in Hebrew), *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 3 (1984): 2–10.

27. Idel, "Concept of the Torah," pp. 39–40.

28. Idel, "World of Angels," p. 6.

29. See K. E. Groezinger, "The Names of God and Their Celestial Powers: Their Function and Meaning in the Hekhalot Literature," in J. Dan, ed., *Early Jewish Mysticism, Studies in Jewish Thought* 6 (1987): 53–69.

30. Quoted in M. Idel, "Infinities of Torah in Kabbalah" in G. Hartman and S. Budick, eds., *Midrash and Literature* (New Haven, Conn., 1986), p. 145.

31. Idel, "Concept of the Torah," pp. 64–65.

32. U. Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (Bloomington, Ind., 1984), p. 154.

33. Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah* (Princeton, N.J., 1987), pp. 460–75.

34. The Neoplatonic theurgist can, indeed, attract the gods in statues here below, but they seem to ignore a supernal pleroma whose dynamics can be affected by the ritual of the theurgist.

35. Divine thought and divine will, which correspond to the two highest *Sefirot*.

36. The term *Behinah* is characteristic of Cordovero's writings, and it refers to the reflections of the features of the ten *Sefirot* in each of them.

37. R. Moses Cordovero, *Or Yaqar* (Jerusalem, 1983), vol. 12, p. 147.

38. See pp. 59–66.

39. Idel, *Kabbalah*, pp. 222–31.

40. See also M. Idel, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia* (Albany, N.Y., 1987), pp. 77–79.

41. Idel, *Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 83–95. Abulafia also had visual experiences (pp. 95–98), but he himself emphasized the importance of the acoustic or linguistic components of the experiences that characterize ecstatic Kabbalah.

42. Idel, *Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 78–79.

43. Abraham Abulafia, *Ḥayei ha-'Olam ha-Ba*, Ms. Oxford, Catalog Neubauer 1582, fol. 45b.

44. Idel, *Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, chap. 1.

45. This issue has to be explored in more detailed studies; until then, see Idel, *Kabbalah*, chap. 5.

46. G. Scholem, "Zehn unhistorische Saetze über Kabbala," in *Geist und Werk: Festschrift zum 75 Geburtstag von Dr. Daniel Brody* (Zurich, 1958), p. 213, sec. 7.

47. On this phenomenon, see R. J. Z. Werblowsky, *Joseph Karo, Lawyer and Mystic* (Philadelphia, 1977), pp. 257–86.

48. Augustine, *Confessiones*, IX, 10. See Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics in Abraham Abulafia*, p. 143, n. 52.

49. See pp. 59–66.

50. See notes 6 and 92. According to *Or ha-Meir*, fol. 37d–38a, "there is a 'voice' (*gol*) that precedes even the 'primordial thought'" (*Qidmat ha-Sekel*), the latter being the source of regular voices and speeches. There are, however, some important instances when Hasidic masters, following kabbalistic statements, conceived the state of silence as superior to that of speech. See M. Hallamish, "On Silence in Kabbalah and Hasidism" (in Hebrew), in M. Hallamish and A. Kasher, eds., *Religion and Language* (Tel Aviv, 1981), pp. 79–89. See also "World of Thought" and "World of Speech," in Rivka Schatz Uffenheimer, *Quietistic Elements in 18th Century Hasidic Thought* (in Hebrew) (Jerusalem, 1968), pp. 121–128, which emphasizes the superiority of the spiritual—that is, the mental—world over the vocal one. On the basis of this material, the relationship between the two realms seems to be much more complex, since even the world of thought includes linguistic elements.

51. See *Shi'ur Qomah*; cf. Martin Cohen, *The Shi'ur Qomah: Liturgy and Theurgy in Pre-Kabbalistic Jewish Mysticism* (London, 1983), pp. 283–342.

52. *Or ha-Emet* (Jhitomir, 1911), fol. 4c. The passage is based on a pun in which the word "Ḥayyot" (heavenly beings) is reinterpreted as "Ḥyyiut" (vitality), which stands in Hasidic writings for the presence of the divine force in man. This play on the *Ḥayyot-Ḥyyut* seems to stem from the Besht himself. See G. Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York, 1972), p. 219.

53. See pp. 58, 68–69.

54. Michael Oppenheim, "The Meaning of Hasidut: Martin Buber and Gershom Scholem," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 49 (1971): 410–11. However, Buber's phenomenology of Kabbalah is based exclusively on Lurianic Kabbalah, seemingly ignoring the ecstatic Kabbalah, where some elements of dialogical states are to be found. See Idel, *Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 86–95.

55. Idel, "Magical and Neoplatonic Interpretations of the Kabbalah in the Renaissance," pp. 212–15.

56. Idel, "Magical and Neoplatonic Interpretations of the Kabbalah in the Renaissance," pp. 198–99, 207–9. See also M. Idel, "Jewish Magic

from the Renaissance Period to Early Hasidism," in J. Neusner, E. S. Frerichs, and P. V. McC. Flesher, eds., *Religion, Science, and Magic* (New York, 1989), pp. 82–117.

57. R. Shem Tov ben Shem Tov, *Sefer ha-Emunot* (Ferrara, 1556), fol. 98b.

58. R. Moses Cordovero, *Pardes Rimmonim*, Gate 32, chap. 3.

59. See my detailed discussion of the significance of the palaces as words in "Perceptions of Kabbalah in the Second Half of the 18th Century," *Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 1 (1991): 88–95.

60. R. Yohanan Alemanno, *Collectanea*, Ms. Oxford, Bodleiana, Catalog Neubauer 2234, fol. 3b. For the context of this quotation, see Idel, "Magical and Neoplatonic Interpretations of the Kabbalah in the Renaissance," pp. 207–8.

61. *Penimiut ha-Ruhaniut*. On the meaning of *Ruhaniut* and its sources, see Idel, "Perceptions of Kabbalah," pp. 84–87, and "Magical and Neoplatonic Interpretations of the Kabbalah in the Renaissance," pp. 201–7.

62. Or *Eyin Sof*.

63. See R. Jacob Joseph of Polnoye, *Toldot Ya'akov Yoseph* (Korez, 1780), fol. 25a.

64. Idel, "World of Angels in Human Form," p. 6, n. 16.

65. Idel, "World of Angels in Human Form," p. 6.

66. R. Isaac the Blind, *Commentary on Sefer Yeẓirah*, appendix to Gershom Scholem's lectures, *Ha-Kabbalah be-Provence*, ed. R. Schatz (Jerusalem, 1963), p. 12. For more on R. Isaac's theory of language, see Scholem, "Name of God," pp. 166–69. For parallels to this text, see R. Azriel of Gerone, *Commentary on the Talmudic Aggadot*, ed. I. Tishby (Jerusalem, 1945), pp. 14–15, and the editor's footnotes there.

The view that everything is included in the Hebrew letters has an interesting parallel, and perhaps even its source, in Islam. See Louis Massignon, "La Philosophie orientale d'Ibn Sina et son alphabet philosophique," in *Opera Minora* (Beirut, 1963), 2, pp. 591–605. See also the view of R. Yehudah ben Solomon ha-Cohen, a Toledan thinker with some mystical leanings, who indicated, in the first half of the thirteenth century, that "from our letters everything existing is explained, from its beginning to its end" (*Literaturblatt des Orients* 10 [1849]: 730, n. 24), and note 76.

67. "In the letters are all the entities having a form, included" (R. Jacob ben Sheshet, *Meshiv Devarim Nekhoḥim*, ed. Georges Vajda [Jerusalem, 1969], p. 155). See also note 66.

68. ben Sheshet, *Meshiv Devarim Nekhoḥim*, p. 154.

69. ben Sheshet, *Meshiv Devarim Nekhoḥim*, p. 154. See also Georges Vajda, *Recherches sur la philosophie et la Kabbale dans la pensée juive du Moyen Age* (Paris, 1962), pp. 356–71.

70. 1 Samuel 2: 20; *T. B. Berakhot*, 10a. The Talmudic statement, which envisages God as shaping everything, is understood here as referring to the divine articulation of all the letters, conceived as forms.

71. ben Sheshet, *Meshiv Devarim Nekhoḥim*, p. 154.

72. On the critical attitude of ben Sheshet to the intellectualistic approach of the philosophers, see Vajda, *Recherches sur la philosophie et la Kabbale dans la pensée juive du Moyen Age*, pp. 356–71.

73. ben Sheshet, *Meshiv Devarim Nekhoḥim*, p. 157.

74. Scholem, "Name of God," p. 62.

75. See Gershom Scholem, *Das Buch Bahir* (Darmstadt, 1970), pp. 13–41. There are some pre-Kabbalistic interpretations of the Hebrew alphabet in the Talmudic and Midrashic literature; however, in the first 150 years of kabbalistic writings, kabbalists produced more discussions of this issue than the entire Jewish literature preceding historical Kabbalah.

76. This kabbalistic literary genre has not received due attention from the scholars of Kabbalah. See the interesting treatment of Elias Lipiner, *Ideologie fun Yidishn Alef-Beis* (Buenos Aires, 1967), and especially the expanded Hebrew version (Jerusalem 1988.) See also Colette Sirat, "La Qabbale d'après Juda b. Salomon Ha-Cohen," in G. Nahon and C. Touati, eds., *Hommage à Georges Vajda* (Louvain, 1980), pp. 191–212.

77. Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics in Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 138–39, n. 20.

78. Language (*Lashon*) as a symbol of the *Sefirah* of *Binah* is a commonplace of kabbalistic symbolism. However, this term may point, in some rare cases, to the *Sefirot* of *Tiferet* and *Malkhut*, which, as we shall see, articulate the linguistic material.

79. Gershom Scholem, "Two Treatises by R. Moses de Leon," *Qovez 'Al Yad*, n.s., vol. 8 (1976): 335–36. Compare with pp. 346 and 370, and with the Zoharic material noted by Scholem in his footnotes.

80. 1 Kings 19: 12.

81. R. Moses de Leon, *Shoshan 'Edut*, pp. 335–36.

82. de Leon, *Shoshan 'Edut*, p. 336.

83. de Leon, *Shoshan 'Edut*, pp. 335–36.

84. de Leon, *Shoshan 'Edut*, p. 335.

85. R. Abraham Adrutiel, *Avnei Zikkaron*, Ms. New York, JTS 1659, fol. 96a, 97a, etc.

86. Cf. Job 19: 26. This verse is the *locus probans* of the kabbalistic discussions of the anthropomorphical structure of the Sefirotic realm; here, the Hasidic master transposes the human linguistic process to the intradivine world.

87. *Mazref la-Hokhmah*. I assume that this phrase, translated here literally, refers in this context to the combination of letters at the highest level of the divine realm. See also *Or ha-Meir*, fol. 248ab.

88. *Da'at*. In certain kabbalistical systems, there is a *Sefirah* that mediates between the *Sefirot Hokhmah* and *Binah*; this author is obviously referring to this peculiar status of Knowledge as a mediator between Wisdom and Understanding.

89. The two *Sefirot Hesed* and *Din*, which are located "below" *Da'at*.

90. R. Menahem Mendel of Vitebsk, *Peri ha-Arez* (Jerusalem, 1969), fol. 9a.

91. On this concept, see Scholem, "Name of God," pp. 181–82, and M. Idel, "Differing Conceptions of Kabbalah in the Early 17th Century," in I. Twersky and B. Septimus, eds., *Jewish Thought in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass., 1987), pp. 179–86.

92. R. Levi Isaac of Berditchev, *Qedushat ha-Levi* (Jerusalem, 1972), fol. 117ab. See also R. Menahem Mendel of Vitebsk, *Peri ha-Arez*, fol. 9a. The implicit identification of the "World of Thought" with "speech" is found also elsewhere in the school of the Great Maggid. See *Or ha-Emet*, fol. 4d: "It is as if the first thought is called also speech."

93. See Scholem, *Das Buch Bahir*, pp. 87–88, 168.

94. See Idel, "Infinities of Torah in Kabbalah."

95. Idel, *Kabbalah*, pp. 191–97.

96. Idel, *Kabbalah*, p. 192.

97. Idel, *Kabbalah*, pp. 192–95.

98. Cf. M. Idel, "Kabbalistic Prayer and Colours," in David Blumenthal, ed., *Approaches to Judaism in Medieval Times* (Atlanta, 1988), vol. 3, pp. 17–27.

99. See Idel, "Perceptions of Kabbalah," pp. 94–95.

100. Idel, "Perceptions of Kabbalah," pp. 94–95.

101. Idel, *Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 14–17.

102. J. Mondschein, ed., *Migdal Oz* (Kefar Habad, Isr., 1980), p. 124; R. Jacob Joseph of Polnoye, *Toldot Ya'akov Yoseph*, fol. 25a.

103. R. Meshullam Phoebus of Zbaraz, *Yosher Divrei Emet*, para. 39 (printed with *Liqqutim Yiqarim* [Jerusalem, 1981], fol. 133a). See also *Or ha-Meir*, fol. 239b.

104. R. Isaac of Acre, Ms. Moscow-Guensburg 775, fol. 79a.

105. See S. O. Heller-Wilensky, "R. Isaac ibn Latif: Kabbalist or Philosopher?" in Alexander Altmann, ed., *Jewish Medieval and Renaissance Studies* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), pp. 208–9, and the numerous sources referred to in the footnotes.

106. Abraham Abulafia, *Sefer Sitrei Torah*, Ms. Paris, BN. 774 fol. 163a.

107. Idel, "Infinities of Torah in Kabbalah," p. 149.

108. Cf. M. Idel, "Abulafia on the Jewish Messiah and Jesus," *Immanuel* 11 (1980): 70–72.

109. Idel, "Abulafia on the Jewish Messiah and Jesus"; Scholem, "Name of God," pp. 190–91.

110. R. Yohanan Alemanno, *Heseq Shelomo*, Ms. Oxford, Bodleian, Catalog Neubauer 1595, fol. 66a.

111. The Hebrew language is, therefore, parallel or similar to Kabbalah and Oral Law as an important factor that ensures, according to the kabbalists, the superiority of Judaism.

112. See Grete Schaeder, *The Hebrew Humanism of Martin Buber* (Detroit, 1973), pp. 340–41. Rosenzweig emphasizes the superiority of the spoken word over the written one in "Die Schrift und das Wort!" Compare here Rosenzweig's observation that Scholem regards the written word as revelation and the spoken one as art.

113. See "A Confession on Our Language" (letter, G. Scholem to F. Rosenzweig, 26 December 1926), *Molad* 9 (1985–86): 118–119. On the importance of the mysticism of writing, see Scholem, "Name of God," p. 167.

114. For a survey of Scholem's view of language, see David Biale, *Gershom Scholem: Kabbalah and Counter-History*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, Mass., 1982), pp. 112–42. See especially pp. 119 and 133–34, where Biale points to the affinity between Scholem's mysticism of language and that of the kabbalists and stresses the influence of Walter Benjamin on Scholem's view of language.