

MYSTICISM

in 20th Century Hebrew Literature

Israel: Society, Culture and History

Yaacov Yadgar

(Political Studies, Bar-Ilan University), Series Editor

EDITORIAL BOARD

Alan Dowty,

Political Science and Middle Eastern
Studies, University of Notre Dame

Allan Silver,

Sociology,
Columbia University

Tamar Katriel,

Communication Ethnography,
University of Haifa

Anthony D. Smith,

Nationalism and Ethnicity,
London School of Economics

Avi Sagi,

Hermeneutics, Cultural studies,
and Philosophy, Bar-Ilan University

Yael Zerubavel,

Jewish Studies and History,
Rutgers University



MYSTICISM
in 20th Century Hebrew Literature

Hamutal Bar-Yosef

Boston

2010

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Copyright © 2010 Academic Studies Press
All rights reserved

ISBN: 978-1-936235-01-8

Book design by Olga Grabovsky

Published by Academic Studies Press in 2010

28 Montfern Avenue
Brighton, MA 02135, USA
press@academicstudiespress.com
www.academicstudiespress.com

CONTENTS

PREFACE 11

CHAPTER ONE

Is Mysticism in Modern Hebrew Literature Possible? 15

Secular Jewish Mysticism? • Mysticism and Literature • Literature in Traditional Jewish Mysticism • Modern Hebrew Literature • The Traces of Western Literature • Three Basic Elements • Identifying Mysticism in Modern Poetry

CHAPTER TWO

How did Mysticism Penetrate into Modern Hebrew Literature? 53

Jewish Mysticism and the *Haskalah* Movement • Mysticism in 19th Century Russian Jewish Studies and Literature • The Romantic Stage • The Neo-Romantic Stage • Neo-Hassidic Hebrew Literature • The Russian Context, Soloviev and Bialik's poetry

CHAPTER THREE

Unity, Ecstasy and Visions 95

Mystical Unity • Unachievable Unity • Various Degrees of Intimate Unity • Godmanhood • Up and Down Movements Toward Unity • The Goals of *Dveikut* • Situations of Unity • Ecstasy as Disembodiment • Communicating Excitement • The Anxiety of Ecstasy • Active and Passive Delight and Joy • Joy Through Suffering • Writing as a Situation of Mystical Ecstasy • Symbolic Visions • Jewish Mystical Symbols • Light, Water, White, Rose, Temple, Eros • Jewish and European Symbols • Realistic Details • A Corporal Experience • Coherent and Incoherent Vision Scenes • Summary

CHAPTER FOUR

Self-Annihilation and Death as Mystical Goals 185

Attraction to Death as a Mystical Experience in Various Cultures • Attraction to Death in Russian Culture • Death in Jewish Tradition • Mystical Self-Annihilation in Jewish-Russian Culture • Death in Neo-Hassidic Prose • Self-Annihilation and Death

in Pre-State Hebrew Poetry • Pinhas Sadeh • Amos Oz's Novel *Unto Death* • Zelda • Rabikovich, Sartel, Hurvitz, Rivka Miriam, and Haviva Pedaia • Summary

CHAPTER FIVE

Friendship as a Mystical Goal 265
A Neglected Aspect of Mysticism • *Dveikut Haverim* in Jewish Tradition • Togetherness in East European Neo-Mysticism • Sacred Togetherness in Modern Jewish Thought • Sacred Togetherness in Bialik's Poetry • Sacred Togetherness in Pre-State Poetry • Sacred Togetherness in Israeli Poetry

CHAPTER SIX

Unity as an Erotic Experience 303
Love as a Mystical Experience • The Riddle of the Sacred Woman • The Myth of Sophia in Gnosticism, Judaism and Christianity • Sophiology in the Writings of Vladimir Soloviev and Alexandr Blok • Sophiology in Bialik's Poetry • Shlonsky, Blok and the Sacred Woman • Sophiology in Alterman's "Stars Outside"

CHAPTER SEVEN

Apocalyptic Poetry. 355
Apocalyptic Narrative and Thinking • The Russian Background • The Jewish-Russian Background • Anti-Apocalypse in Bialik's Poetry • Zionism as an Apocalyptic Event

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS 383

BIBLIOGRAPHY 393

INDEX. XX

PREFACE

My interest in Jewish mysticism began in 1957-1960, when I was doing my B.A. at the Hebrew University. I had the privilege to learn from Gershom Scholem, Rivka Schatz-Uffenheimer, Yeshaiahu Tishbi, Shlomo Pines and Yosef Dan. I came back to this field when I was writing a book on Zelda's poetry.¹ The study of Zelda's poems led me to her Hassidic background, including the *Tania* and the writings of her uncle, Rabbi Avraham Khen.² While doing research on the Russian background of modern Hebrew literature, I discovered the important role of modern Russian mysticism in modern Jewish culture and early Zionism. I learned about the influence of Vladimir Soloviev and his followers on Jewish writers who were acquainted with Russian literature and thought. I realized the affinity of early 20th century Jewish literature with the Russian understanding of Revolution as an apocalyptic event.

During 1995-2005 I was a research fellow at the Jerusalem Hartman Institute. The cooperation with my colleagues, and especially with Moshe Idel, encouraged my interest in modern mysticism. A few months at the Center for Judaic Studies in Philadelphia in 2003 helped me to begin this project, which took four years to finish.

In writing this book I hoped to show that *traditional Jewish mysticism, whose literary character has only recently been uncovered, was continued in the 20th century by Hebrew writers and poets, many of whom were non-observant Jews*. The idea is not completely innovative. Various scholars have already found mystical elements in the writings of Bialik, Agnon, Alterman, and many other authors of 20th century Hebrew literature. I tried to examine this phenomenon from a panoramic point of view which encircles 20th century Hebrew literature, focusing on poetry.

1 Bar-Yosef, *Al shirat Zelda*.

2 Avraham Khen, *Bemalkhut ha-yahadut*.

It was clear to me from the very beginning that the map which I shall draw is not going to be complete, for it will be influenced by my preferences and my limitations of knowledge. Only after I realized enormous amount of the materials did I understand that I would have to pay a high price: I could not go deeply into any poets work — and there are many who deserve such thorough analysis. I have brought fragmentary examples from poems and books rich with mystical expression, avoiding close reading. Such examples do not give a fair idea of the poems' beauty. I could not follow the development of mystical ideas and style in the literary work of specific poets (the only exclusion is Pinhas Sadeh, whose attitude to death as mystical experience I tried to analyze diachronically in the fourth chapter). I have not even mentioned the names of poets who publish mystical poetry, but did not supply me with clear examples for my arguments. I avoided poets whose work did not seem to me to be a clear illustration of the phenomena I wanted to examine. I hope that an anthology of mystical Hebrew poems will appear in the future, and more researches will correct the injustices I have made.

It is my pleasant duty to thank The Hartman Institute for the wonderful feeling of a spiritual home it gave me, and to the Institute for Judaic Studies in Philadelphia, with its wonderful library service. I also thank Moshe Idel, Yosef Dan, Rachel Elijor, Zvi Mark, Yehuda Liebes, Yoni Garb, Melila Helner, Avraham Elquayam, Haviva Pedaya and Menahem Lorberbaum, who have read the Hebrew manuscript, or parts of it, and added useful comments. I would also like to thank the dedicated and patient librarians of the Hebrew National Library and the librarians of the Scholem Collection Section there.

CHAPTER ONE

Is Mysticism in Modern Hebrew Literature Possible?

Secular Jewish Mysticism?

This book deals with Hebrew literary texts which describe and express mystical experiences and insights. It does not deal with mysticism as a social phenomenon, either esoteric or populist, nor does it focus on practices, rites, cults, or any other cultural collective activities. It does not deal with the writers' biographies — biographical information about the writer's experiences, way of life and cultural context will serve here only as an aid for the interpretation of the literary text.

This book is intended to show that many 20th century Hebrew literary works describe and express mystical experiences, and therefore these works are a continuation of the traditional Jewish mysticism and an integral part of Jewish mystical literature. Is it possible to speak seriously of mysticism in the Jewish context without a religious frame of life?

Gershom Scholem, the scholar who founded the basis for the academic research of Jewish mysticism, wrote that “there is no mysticism for itself, there is only mysticism of a specific religious system — Christian, Moslem, Jewish etc. [...] only in our time has the idea of abstract mystical religion laid down roots [...] but history proves that the great mystics were connected to the great religions and their beliefs.”³ Yosef Ben-Shlomo, the scholar of Jewish philosophy and mysticism, wrote: “The statement ‘every mysticism is based on religion’ can serve as a criterion to the understanding of mystical phenomenon. This is its difference from other fields of the human spirit. In this sense Proust and Rimbeau were not mystics.”⁴ In contrast to this stance, which denies the possibility of a mysticism which is outside the context of a specific religion, there are scholars who see mysticism as a universal human experience. According

3 Scholem, *Kabbalah*, p. 6

4 Ben-Shlomo, “Mysticism and Religion,” p. 134.

to this view, which I accept, “Mysticism might be connected with religion but this is not a necessary condition.”⁵

The root of disagreement about the religious character of “mysticism” is the different understanding of this term. In fact, the differences of opinion among scholars of mysticism about the essence of “mysticism” in general, and “Jewish mysticism” in particular, are so great that they might shatter any argument about mysticism at all. It seems that whoever wishes to deal seriously with this topic should first of all make clear what he/she means by “mysticism.” Here follows my definition of mystical experience, which is far from being original:

Mystical experience, when in its climax, is a strong, ecstatic feeling of joyful exaltation. It is a paradoxical feeling of personal perfection together with self-annihilation. It is an intimate contact with a sacred, mysterious divine being, abundant with and bestowing goodness and beauty. Mystical experience involves disconnection from physical and emotional needs, from distresses, bereavement and loss. It is a feeling of freedom from egoistical impulses and greediness. This freedom from physical and material needs enables a feeling of power, independence and exaltation. Together with the feeling of self-annihilation it transforms negative impulses into a consciousness of value, greatness and honor. These feelings are based on a belief in the existence of a spiritual dimension to the world, and in the astonishing, paradoxical possibility of breaking the border between the human and the divine worlds. The extreme, non-realistic character of this experience makes it difficult to communicate. It is therefore often transmitted by literary means, including esoteric language, ecstatic rhetoric and symbols.

In contrast to the scholars whose approach emphasizes the “contingent,” or culturally specific elements of mysticism,⁶ I agree with scholars of mysticism who regard it as a basic human need, which is not conditioned by an established religion or a specific culture. Therefore mystical experiences can be achieved by secular human beings. How surprisingly similar are mystical experiences and their symbolical images, when expressed by people who belong to different religions and cultures! “All mystics speak the same language,” stated Evelyn

5 Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, p. 39.

6 The term “contingent” is used by Dan, *On Sacredness*, pp. 89-90.

Underhill.⁷ “The uniformity [of mystical texts which belong to different religions] is clearer in mysticism than in [orthodox] religion; they are sometimes word-by-word formulations,” writes Ben-Shlomo.⁸ This relative uniformity can be traced in modern literature, written by non-observant Jews.

There is no doubt that culture moulds the mystical experience and its stylistic expression, in the same way as it moulds other emotional experiences. Culture can determine the degree of consciousness to mysticism and the degree of its centrality. Nowadays, however, in a culture which emphasizes the particularity of cultural contexts, ethnic identity and gender differences, it is interesting to examine the mystical experience as a basis for the spiritual unity of mankind.

Is it possible for a non-religious person to have an authentic mystical experience? The indivisibility of mysticism from religion was created in 17th century departments of theology in European universities, where academic research of mysticism in terms of Christian theology began.⁹ In this Christian context, mysticism was considered to be the highest expression of religious life.¹⁰ Today the academic research of mysticism has spread into history, anthropology, psychology, art and literature, but it is still considered a traditional part of departments of theology. In these departments, mysticism is studied by experts who are supplied with theological knowledge, theoretical background and research methodology.¹¹ This is the reason why mystical texts were more often examined as expressions of theological views than as literary texts expressing emotions.

The approach to mysticism as an emotional experience was initiated by 19th century German philosophy (especially in the writings of Friedrich Schelling and Friedrich Schleiermacher), and was continued by neo-Romantic litera-

7 Underhill, *Mysticism*, p. 80.

8 Ben-Shlomo, “Mysticism and Religion,” p. 156.

9 De Certeau, “Mysticism,” p. 17.

10 On the difference between the Jewish and the Christian meanings of “Sacredness,” See Dan, *On Sacredness*, pp. 11-30.

11 McGinn, *The Foundation of Mysticism*, pp. 262-343. McGinn divides modern research of mysticism into theological, philosophical and comparative-psychological, not reserving a separate place for literature and art. The researches he cites examine mysticism as a religious phenomenon. See also De Certeau, “Mysticism,” pp. 14-16.

ture and thought at the turn of the 20th century.¹² In the 20th century, Martin Heidegger and Ludwig Wittgenstein saw mysticism as a primary, universal human category of knowledge. The understanding of mysticism as a universal mental and spiritual activity was developed in the 20th century by Albert Schweitzer, Henri Bergson, William James, Jaques Maritain, Evelyn Underhill and many others.¹³ William James, the pioneer of “pluralistic mysticism” argued that the concept “God” does not necessarily have a supernatural meaning.¹⁴ Rudolf Otto wrote that the mystic has a God which is different from the orthodox one.¹⁵ Nietzsche went to the furthest paradox, saying: “I am a mystic and I believe in nothing.”¹⁶

The comparative research of mysticism turned first to the religions of the Far East, in spite of the fact that they do not include God. In the 20th century, the anthropological scope of this research widened, and now it includes even Eskimoan mysticism.¹⁷ Following this expansion the concept “Mysticism” was widened. The tension between mysticism and the established religion, even in Christianity, became clearer. The purely theological (in fact, theosophical) approach to mysticism is now challenged by many scholars, who turn to other points of view. The modern concept of Jewish mysticism as a spiritual experience of unity whose object is “a sacred being,” not necessarily “God” was accepted by Martin Buber and by other Jewish scholars working in the first half of the 20th century.¹⁸

Although the focus of mystical experience is not the revelation of theological truth but the emotional experience, it is still an experience of inner enlight-

12 On Schelling and Kabbalah see Shulte, “Zimzum bei Schelling”; Idel, *New Perspectives*, p. 275. See also Hurvitz, “On Kabbalah and Mythos.” On the interest in mysticism in Germany at turn of the 20 century see Mendes-Flohr, “Orientalism.” On mysticism in Russia during the Silver Age see Rosenbach, *Contemporary Mysticism*.

13 McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, pp. 266-326.

14 James, *The Religious Experience*, pp. 403-408.

15 Otto, *Mysticism East and West*, p. 258. According to Otto the God of the mystic is immanent, while the God of the orthodox is transcendental.

16 Cited by De Certeau, “Mysticism,” p. 22.

17 Hollenback, *Mysticism*, pp. 305-446; Katz, *Mysticism and Religious Traditions*.

18 Ross, *Beloved and Hated Tradition*, pp. 199-211.

enment, endowing one with a feeling of insight into reality. It enables one to understand reality and to accept it as full of beauty and wisdom. This experience not only cancels inner conflicts, not only fills one with inner powers and joy, but is also an experience of understanding things that were not understood before. It is very difficult to formulate this feeling of insight and understanding as a theological argument, since it is not a knowledge or truth in the scientific or philosophical sense. Religious people can take this feeling as a confirmation of their faith. For secular people it can be a drive to moral impulses or to a change of their world view. It is natural then to find in traditional mystical texts expressions of true revelations out of irrational enlightenment, as well as formulations of the mystical experience in philosophical or even semi-scientific ways, such as a schematic, scientifically systematic descriptions of the divine world or the processes of its communication with the human world. In Jewish classical kabalistic texts, such formulations are frequent and central. However, they do not condition the existence of a mystical experience; they are a reflection of the cultural background, in which philosophical-scientific style was the accepted way to express such experiences.

The argument that there are mystical elements in 20th century Hebrew literature raises one more basic question: can Jews who do not observe the religious laws create Jewish mysticism?

The understanding of mysticism as a product of a specific culture, and of culture as a central factor in the formulation and interpretation of religious beliefs and experiences,¹⁹ can serve as a basis to the argument that people who live in a secular culture can have mystical experiences, and these experiences are formulated and interpreted according to the conventions of this specific culture.

Haviva Pedaia, the mystical poet and academic scholar of mysticism, when asked “Can a *lo-dati* [secular] person achieve a mystical experience?” said: “If by *lo-dati* you mean that he does not observe the *mitzvot* [the Jewish religious laws] — then yes, no doubt.”²⁰ In 1984 the poet Yona Wollach, who lived a completely secular, bohemian life in Tel-Aviv, told the poet and editor Helit Yeshurun:

19 Jonas, *Myth and Mysticism*, esp. p. 328; Smart, “Interpretation,” esp. p. 16.

20 Pedaia, “Interview,” p. 185.

I met God, and my life went upside down [...] a light began, at that period light was going around in my head [...] and a man went down from heaven, with all the constellations, and I saw the creation of the world [...] it made me seclude myself and reflect for many years [...] I used to hear Him since I was a small kid. I used to awfully love Him [...] I saw a cloud of mist into which I was swallowed, and then I came home.²¹

Gershom Scholem in his book, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (1941), wrote that Hassidism was the last chapter in the history of Jewish mysticism, and that “My contemporaries can only tell the story [of Jewish mysticism], not share the experience.”²² In his essay “Reflections on the Possibility of Jewish Mysticism Today” Scholem wrote that “during the last generations there were no awakenings of individuals which produced new forms of mystical theologies or movements which were meaningful in public life.”²³ The reason for that, according to Scholem, is that Jewish mysticism is not possible without a belief in God and the sacredness of the Torah, without which the basis of Jewish mysticism completely collapses.²⁴

The stipulation of mysticism as based on religious belief and life is still accepted by many scholars today, and in fact it seems necessary when dealing with Jewish mysticism. “Secular Jewish mysticism” is a combination of words which sounds paradoxical to observant Jews and to those who identify Judaism with observance. They can justly ask: if one does not believe in God, with what is he united during his *Unio Mystica*?

I would like to answer this question — as Jews often do — with another question: which God are you speaking of? My understanding is that religious people use the word “God” in many different meanings, and even the same religious person uses it during his life in different meanings. One of these meanings can be: the origin of the need to elevate oneself above the usual everyday life and distance oneself from the pursuit of material and physical pleasures and from egoistical impulses. This feeling of deep impulse to make

21 Wollach, “Interview,” p. 115.

22 Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 350. See also Idel, *New Perspectives*, p. 283.

23 Scholem, *Explications and Implications*, vol. 1, p. 71.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 80.

life more pure, spiritual and moral — sometimes without knowing how to do it — is characteristic of mystical life in many cultures, even without a belief in a certain God.

Hollenback stated that the mystic reveals a truth, which is considered to be absolute in his society or culture.²⁵ However, if this truth is already accepted anyhow, what does the mystic reveal? It seems that in a religious culture the role of mystical experience is not the revelation of theological truth, but the emotional power of the experience and the power it gives to the believers.²⁶ In a modern secular society, however, where mysticism is looked at with suspicion and even hostility, the mere information about a mystical experience and the happiness it gives can be an astonishing revelation of a new truth. In a modern secular culture, more than in a traditional religious one, the mystical experience is a revelation of a surprising truth, which is to be found beyond the conventional cultural horizons.

Scholem concluded his *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* with reflections on the possibility that “the story [of Jewish mysticism] has not yet been finished [...]its treasure of secret life can still break out tomorrow in you or in me.”²⁷ In his aforementioned essay, “Reflections on the Possibility of Jewish Mysticism Today,” he went further and asked: “Who knows where are the borders of sacredness? [...]This sacredness might appear in the innermost center of this [Zionist] secular life. Maybe new forms of mysticism are unrecognized in terms of the [Jewish] tradition. Maybe this [new] mysticism will not fit in the conservative tradition of the [Jewish] mystics, for it will have a secular meaning.”²⁸ These reflections shake Scholem’s previous argument, according to which Jewish mysticism is not possible without traditional Jewish religion. They accentuate the innovative, law-breaking character of mysticism in general, and Jewish mysticism in particular. Jewish mystics always tended to diminish the value of traditional practice of the *mitzvot*, demanding to practice them according to an innovative interpretation, completely different from the

25 Hollenback, *Mysticism*, p. 40.

26 Garb, *Power in Jewish Mysticism*.

27 Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 350.

28 Scholem, *Explications and Implications*, p. 82.

orthodox one. Kabbalah and Hassidism, which today are considered inseparable parts of traditional Judaism, in the 19th century were considered by both orthodox Jews and maskilim to be ex-Jewish phenomena. True, there were periods — especially the Middle Ages — when mystics such as RAMBAN, RASHBA, Bahyai Ibn Paquda and Avraham son of RAMBAM were central figures in Jewish culture. In other periods, Jewish mysticism was accused of alien influences. It is not by chance that the Jewish mystical movements, Sabbateanism and Frankism, led Jews out of Judaism, to Islam and to Christianity. Even in the Middle Ages mystical techniques of observing religious laws were not the only Jewish mystical means to redemption. Personal perfection and the cancellation of physical influence on the spirit, even without observing the *mitzvot*, were also considered as redemptive mystical activities.²⁹

Scholars of Jewish mysticism emphasize the fact that in spite of new interpretations and practices of the religious laws, Jewish mysticism has never disconnected itself from the fulfillment of the *mitzvot* and the study of the Torah.³⁰ In fact, Jewish mystics often present themselves as pupils of ancient teachers, but at the same time they claim to achieve “a revelation of Eliahu,” namely to reveal something completely new.³¹ “The Zohar is a total renaissance of Jewish culture” wrote Liebes.³² All Jewish traditional mystical movements began with a striving for spiritual renovation of Judaism, and therefore at their beginnings they had to withdraw from their contemporaneous dominant orthodoxy.³³

Refutations of the authenticity of mysticism in texts written by secular Jews are sometimes based on the argument that their use of words such as “God,” “redemption” and “sacredness” is “hollow” or “empty,” because it is just metaphorical. This argument raises the question: What is the meaning of religious terms and narratives for an observant Jew? Does he use them throughout his life in a literal sense? It is clear that even the most orthodox Jew does not un-

29 Idel, “Patterns of Redeeming Activity,” pp. 253-279.

30 Idel, *New Perspectives*, pp. 10-13; Dan, *On Sacredness*, p. 154.

31 Dan, “Prayer As Text,” p. 34.

32 Liebes, “New Directions,” p. 160. See also idem, *Hazohar ke-renaissance*.

33 Elior, “Jewish Mysticism and Freedom.”

derstand the scriptures literally, for the midrash itself interprets the Torah as a non-literal text, and the mystical midrash does so in a much more daring way. The border between a literal and metaphorical understanding of God is located in different places in the consciousnesses of religious people, and even in the consciousness of the same person at different ages.³⁴ Contemporaneous scholars of mysticism argued that the traditional mystical text does not enable us to know what was the real mystical experience which it reflected, because we have nothing but the text, which documents the experience indirectly, by metaphors and symbols.³⁵ This fact does not shatter the authenticity of traditional mystical experience.

However, if a mystical experience is authentic and serious, even when it is expressed by metaphors and symbols, which hide the real experience, why are the same metaphors and symbols “hollow” if written by a secular person? Information about the observance of the *mitzvot* by the writer might be relevant for a full understanding of these texts, but this is not a condition or a criterion for treating it as part of the Jewish mystical tradition. The criterion is the experience which the text itself communicates to the reader.

The tension between tradition and a daring new creation lies in the center of every mystical literature. It is possible to argue that today, poetical documentation of mystical experiences is less daring than it used to be in the stiff frames of Orthodox Jewish culture, but let us not forget that the secular system of literary reception, even if it considers itself liberal, has its own conventions and norms, which causes it to reject — sometimes with surprising fanaticism — elements which are alien to it. In this sense, during the 20th century secular mystical literature is a special genre of subversive, “peripheral” writing (in post-modernist terms). It was created by a very small group of writers and poets, whose lives were uncharacteristic of the average Israeli intellectual. Like mysticism in Orthodox society, this literature was also a proposal of a purer, more spiritual life, and it became a reservoir of cultural dynamics, whose power cannot yet be measured.

34 On the problem of distinction between literal and symbolic uses of religious terms see Bevan, *Symbolism*, pp. 252-274.

35 Idel, “Universalization and Integration,” p. 27; Dan, *Apocalypse*, p. 7; idem, *On Sacredness*, p. 42.

Mysticism and Literature

What is a mystical text? Like any literary text the mystical text transmits emotions and insights in a style which attracts the reader to the writer's personal experience and world view.³⁶ "Mystics are generally individuals who search for a deep communion with God in a personal, intensive, unique way," wrote Yosef Dan.³⁷ Personal, intensive and unique — these are also the desirable qualities of the literary text, and in fact, despite the difficulty, often mentioned in definitions of "mysticism," of expressing mystical experiences in words, many mystics wrote texts which witness a wonderful mastery of the art of literature. These texts shared and will continue to share the writer's experiences and his world view with many readers, and they are part of the history of culture and a reservoir of influence on culture in the future.

As with any literary text, the understanding of the mystical text depends on interpretation. This interpretation depends on the cultural and literary background of the reader, which does not, however, mean that it is completely subjective. Even the identification of the text's mystical character depends on the reader's cultural and literary background.

Theories which deny literary works truth value, and see them as an aesthetic and linguistic products only, can lead us to the conclusion that there is a principal difference between mysticism and literature, because the mystical text expresses an absolute truth, while literature, and especially poetry, is fiction; truth is beyond its scope.³⁸ This view of literature was popular during the 1960s-1970s, when formalistic and structuralistic approaches to literature, focusing on the formal and aesthetic aspects of the literary text and rejecting the importance of its contents, were imported from the West from Eastern Europe, where these approaches were in opposition to the oppressive demand to write "realistic" literature.

36 Mina, "The Textuality," pp. 37-39, 44-45.

37 Dan, "Prayer as Text," p. 34.

38 Dan, *On Sacredness*, pp. 31-58.

Nowadays literary scholars often deal with the political role of the literary text and with its reflection of reality. From this point of departure it is possible to continue and treat mystical literature — both classical and modern — as multi-level linguistic products, designed to share experiences, visions and insights of truth with a reader. This truth is the astonishing moment of revelation, of contact with sacredness, indirectly transmitted by symbolical images and events, esoteric language and inter-textual allusions. Mystical texts, like certain poems, were designed for only a small group of elitist “enlightened” readers, who can decipher a difficult, multi-dimensional linguistic code.

What makes a traditional mystical text into a work of literature? Not only the reader’s subjective impression of the beauty and emotional power of the text, but also the need for literary interpretation in order to fully understand it. This is why style is a necessary key to the distinction between a text which gives information *about* mystical experiences or explains the ways to achieve such experiences, on the one hand, and a text which describes mystical experiences by using indirect language, replete with images and rhetorical devices on the other. Such a text transmits great emotions and needs interpretation of its implicit contents, in words that cannot reconstruct the impression and the effects of the text itself.

Another basis for the argument that a mystical text is completely different from any other literary text is that mystical texts have a divine authority which literature cannot have.³⁹ History of culture shows that the measure of authority culture allows to either literature or mysticism is not constant: there were secular cultures in which literature had an enormous authority and was considered as the main representative of common ideals, while there were religious cultures in which mysticism had no legitimate authority.

Not every poem is mystical. Poetry is not mystical in its essence, and the poet’s moment of inspiration is not necessarily a mystical experience.⁴⁰ Some

39 Idel, “Universalization and Integration,” p. 17.

40 For the understanding of poetic inspiration as a mystical experience, see Gatenby, *The Cloudmen*, pp. 9-11; Maritain, *Creative Intuition*, pp. 172-173; Elshtein, “Sensitive and trans-Sensitive,” pp. 13-30. Elshtein argues that the mystic “descends” while the poet “ascends” in their way between the material and the transcendental.

scholars argue that it is possible to scientifically identify mystical poetry by its hypnotic influence on the reader.⁴¹ Some scholars of mysticism identify mystical style by the use of oxymora and paradoxes, expressing the transrational character of the transcendent reality; by the use of synaesthesia, describing supersensory experiences; by the use of esoteric words, and strange syntax and rhetoric, which creates a magic, hypnotic impression; by the use of symbols, especially from the mystical tradition (such as light and darkness, fire, rainbow colors, lily or rose, bird, pilgrim, erotic feelings and activity, and in Jewish mysticism, also temple, gates, king and throne). To this we should add the inter-textual aspect, which refers to the mystical traditional texts and thus joins their world. It is clear that a secular poet can use all these devices as well, in a poem which does not necessarily express a mystical experience, for example one which parodies a mystical text.

Like any interpretation of literary text, the identification and classification of a text as belonging to the mystical category should be based neither on style only nor on contents and theme alone. The categorization of a text as mystical should be decided on the basis of a *cluster* of its thematic, emotional, conceptual and stylistic qualities. Their joined presence in the text produces its mystical character, which links it to the tradition of mystical literature.

A literary text is mystical if it expresses a mystical experience and wishes to share it with the reader. This does not include texts which describe mystical life from a critical or an “objective” point of view. It also excludes poems which describe and explain the writer’s relationship with God, or deal with a theological theme without trying to share a powerful emotional experience with the reader. True, the borders are not always clear. In the same story or novel one can find both a voice which describes mystical life and behavior from an external, documental or even satirical point of view, and an “internal” voice which describes and expresses the mystical experiences of his characters. In modern literary texts an ambivalent attitude to mysticism can be found. The writer can open various possible attitudes to mysticism (each incorporated by a different character) and leave the reader to choose between them. In fact,

41 Zur, *Hypnotic Poetry*, pp. 32-52. Zur alternatively writes about “metaphysical” and “mystical” poetry. See also Elshtein, pp. 13-26.

the variety and complexity of attitudes toward mysticism is one of the major differences between modern and traditional mystical literature.

We should bear in mind that art and literature indirectly reflect theoretical views of reality, influenced by contemporaneous scientific, philosophical and psychological theories. High intellectual energies are active in the moments of mystical creativity, the same as in the moments of literary inspiration. Poets, like mystics, do not only report on experiences, they also discover laws which do not have a ready linguistic formulation, so they create a special language which expresses indirectly what cannot be expressed in the usual, known language.⁴² The literary mystical work describes not only experiences, but also new mystical world views.

Such texts describe the exciting path which leads to unity with God; the relations between God and the terrestrial, human world; the ways God is reflected in the terrestrial world; personal or collective redemption and the way which leads to it; the difficulty of expressing in words the meeting with the transcendent reality — theosophical themes which engage both traditional and modern mysticism. Symbolical images, together with other indirect linguistic devices, are used in order to describe powerful experiences of exaltation, disembodiment, and absorption in a divine being or searching the way to it. The poetic devices can be both traditional and idiosyncratic.

As mentioned above, the classification of a poem as “mystical” and its interpretation depends upon the reader’s acquaintance with the variety of mystical literary traditions and conventions: namely, upon his cultural background and personal horizons.

Writers and artists enthusiastically expressed the Western rise of interest in mysticism, especially in the periods of 19th century Romanticism and turn of the 20th century Neo-romanticism. Romantic thinkers highly valued mysticism and literature alike as irrational, extra-scientific activities. They believed that artists and poets, like mystics, describe not only the secret spiritual reality which was revealed to them and the powerful emotional event which they experienced. They also understood the poet’s moments of inspiration as moments of prophetic revelations of sacred truth.

42 See the chapter “Poetry, Mysticism and Metaphysics” in Maritain’s *Creative Intuition*, pp. 234-250.

Scholars of mysticism often mention literary works of modern writers as documentations of mystical experiences. Walt Whitman is often mentioned in R. M. Bucke's *Cosmic Consciousness: A Study in the Evolution of the Human Mind* (1901). Following Bucke, William James and Scholem after him mentioned Whitman as an example of the possibility of mysticism in modern literature.⁴³ Evelyn Underhill mentioned Dante and Blake.⁴⁴ The research of world literature is rich with books on mysticism in the works of Dante, Wordsworth, Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Rilke, Joyce, Tagore, Kafka, T.S. Eliot, Beckett, C elan and others, as well as in a specific period, movement or national literature. This rich literary research of mystical aspects in world literature is supported by philosophical and psychological methods of interpretation, as well as by stylistic analysis. This list of modern mystical poets and writers includes two unobservant Jews: Kafka and C elan. Why not turn to modern Hebrew literature and ask about its contact with mysticism?

Literature in Traditional Jewish Mysticism

The criteria which were offered above for a mystical literary text exclude a considerable group of the texts, which are generally considered to be an organic part of traditional Jewish mysticism. Texts with technical directions for the achievement of mystical experiences, biographies of mystics and reports about miracles are texts *about* mysticism; they thematically belong to mysticism, but they cannot be considered mystical literature in the full sense of the word. In contrast, many traditional Jewish mystical texts are clearly mystical literature, and can be seen as an integral part of Jewish literature, written in Hebrew, Aramaic or Yiddish.⁴⁵ The abundance of traditional mystical texts proves that the avoidance of personal experiences did not result

43 Bucke, *Cosmic Consciousness*, pp. 215-236; James, *The Religious Experience*, p. 396; Scholem, *Explications and Implications*, vol 1, p. 82. I would like to thank Stuart Shoffman for the reference to Bucke.

44 Underhill, *Mysticism*, pp. 135, 473.

45 In Israeli universities such texts are generally studied not in departments of Hebrew literature but in departments of "Jewish Thought" (*Makhshvet Israel*), and as a result their theological qualities overshadow their literary qualities, which are underestimated.

from the Jewish mystics' belief that it was impossible to express mystical experiences by words.

In comparison with Christianity and Islam, the character of Jewish mystical activity is more practical, because religious practice, including the practice of learning Torah, is so central to the religion. Jewish mystics constantly warn of extreme emotional experiences leading to unsocial behavior, and refrain from individualistic seclusion.⁴⁶ The constant interest in the nation's — not the individual's — fate is also characteristic of Jewish mysticism. All these can explain the non-personal character of Jewish traditional texts.

The traditional, Scholem-oriented reading of such texts tends to focus on the theological aspect, while their reading as literary texts is only now beginning to develop.⁴⁷ Until the 1980s the stamp of the theological-philosophical approach was dominant in the research of Jewish mysticism. Gershom Scholem, a student of the German academy on the one hand, and of the revolutionary Zionist ideology on the other, was interested mainly in the theosophical aspect and in the revolutionary role of Jewish mysticism. He systematically opposed any view of Jewish mysticism as literature. He harshly attacked Meyer Wiener, the editor of the anthology *Lyric der Kabbalah* (The Lyrics of Kabbalah 1917-1920), who translated into German many dozens of Jewish mystical poems from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, such as the Razi'el hymns, poems of Zefat Kabbalists (Azukri, Najara, Di Modena and others), as well as poets from Yemen, Italy and Poland, and even excerpts for the Karaitic literature.⁴⁸ Gershom Scholem's opposition to such views of Jewish mysticism influenced its research for more than half a century.

Until recently, research on Jewish mysticism treated with reservation the emotional aspect of the mystical texts. The writers' creative play, their joy, their exaltation, their emotional conflicts, their complex attitude to the terrestrial world, their wish to share with the reader their way to unity and their

46 Idel, "Seclusion," pp. 35-82.

47 The most impressive work which offers such a reading is Helner, *A River*. Such readings can be also found in Oron, *Ha-pli'ah and Ha-kaneh*; idem, "Ars Poetica in the Zohar"; Pechter, "Between Night and Morning."

48 Wiener, *Lyric der Kabbalah*; Scholem, "Lyric der Kabbalah?"; see also Brody and Wiener, *Selected Hebrew Poetry*.

mapping of the upper world, their tendency to ecstasy and even to madness — all these only recently came to light through research. The only exception is Rabbi Nahman's stories — uncharacteristic of Hassidic literature — which won the scholars' attention in spite of their irregularity, due to Martin Buber's work and because of their affinity to modernist literature.⁴⁹

Scholem was convinced that Jewish mysticism — in contrast to Christian — is poor in autobiographical and lyrical expressions.⁵⁰ The research of Jewish mysticism focused on the genres of apocalyptic visions, mystical *midrash* (whose most important representative is the Zohar),⁵¹ mystical *mussar* (moral teaching) literature, and Hassidic stories and preaching. The focus on these genres and the non-literary approach toward them strengthened the impression that in contrast to Christian and Moslem mystical literature, in Jewish mysticism, despite its quantity and the variety of its genres, it is difficult to find literary “lyrical” texts, namely lyrical poetry or personal confessions of mystical ecstasy, which are frequent in Christian and Moslem-Sufi literature. Poetic texts by Jewish mystics such as Shlomo Ibn Gabirol, Elazar Azikri, Moshe Zakut and Shalom Shabazi do not take a clear place in Scholem-oriented reviews of the history of Jewish mysticism.⁵² The poetry of Ibn Gabirol, and especially his long poem “*Keter Malhut*” (The Kingly Crown) is the only literary text which won relatively wide attention, maybe because of the high status Ibn Gabirol's *Mekor Hayim* (The Source of Life) has had in European philosophy.⁵³ Scholem denied Ibn Gabirol's influence on Kabbalah, which according to him began only in the 12th century.⁵⁴ Liebes, however, found in Gabirol's poetry clear traces and development of the creation theory found in

49 Elshtein, *Ecstasy and Hassidic Tale*; Mark, “On Laughter and Play”; Schleicher, *A Theory of Redemption*.

50 Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 16.

51 Idel, *New Perspectives*, pp. 11-13.

52 Many Jewish poetical mystical texts were examined by scholars, but their approach was generally non-literary. Exceptions are Grünwald, “The Ways of Midrash”; idem, “The Angels' Songs.”

53 On *Keter Hayim* see Pines, Ibn Gabirol; Simon, “Ibn Gabirol”; Levin, *The Mystery*; Katz, “Poetry and Mystery”; Liebes, “I Love You.”

54 Scholem, “Ibn Gabirol's Traces.”

Sefer Yetsira (The Book of Creation), the first book of Jewish Kabbalah.⁵⁵ Scholem's reservations on Ibn Gabirol as an important Jewish mystic have become, so it seems, an obstacle not easy to overcome. The *heikhalot* literature and the excerpts of poetry in the Kumran scrolls were lately examined and analyzed in detail, again from the theological (and from the political) points of view, not as emotional or literary texts.⁵⁶

This situation undoubtedly has roots in the special character of Jewish mysticism. Diaries and documentation of mystical experiences — forms which appear frequently in Christian mysticism — are relatively rare in Hebrew,⁵⁷ and the majority of the existent texts is written in a matter-of-fact tone which does not convey too much emotion (maybe in order to emphasize their authenticity). Gershom Scholem wrote: "I tend to believe that this lack of sympathy to excessive personal self-expression is a result of, among other things, the fact that Jews kept a high sensitivity toward the contradiction between the mystical experience and the concept of God as creator, king and legislator."⁵⁸ He remarked that it was a result of the Jewish mystics' "masculine" identity.⁵⁹

In fact, theological wisdom is mixed with a powerful emotional-spiritual experience even in theosophical Kabbalistic texts, the Zohar being the most famous example, and even more so in texts whose literary character is clearer. Only theoretically can we distinguish between these two components and weigh their relative dominance.

Literary creativity is part of mystical experience in Jewish mysticism. The song was an important element in ancient Jewish mysticism. The writers of the *heikhalot* literature, considered to be the most ancient Jewish mystical literature, described the Jewish mystical experience as an ascent to heaven by a kingly chariot, while hearing and sharing the angels' singing to God. While ascending to "the seven temples" in heaven the *heikhalot* mystics saw the an-

55 Liebes, "I Love You"; Schlanger, "Ibn Gabirol."

56 Elior, *Temple and Chariot*.

57 See Pechter's introduction to Azikri, *Heavenly Words*, pp. 22-23; Werblowsky, *Rabi Yosef Karo*. On the mystical diaries of Rabbi ha-Nazir see Schwarz, *Religious Zionism*, pp. 149-197. On Rabbi Ashlag's diary see Garb, *The Chosen*, pp. 57-63.

58 Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 16.

59 Ibid.

gels who were singing before the heavenly throne, and did the same: they spoke the poetic language of the heavenly beings.⁶⁰ The song was a condition for seeing the Divine Chariot, for the secrets of the Torah were revealed only to those who knew the secret of the song. Rabbi Akiva said: “Having prayed the prayer [which he himself composed] I saw 640 ten thousands of angels of Honor standing against the Throne of Honor.”⁶¹ The composition of the song was the beginning of a process, which led the Jewish mystic to the sacred revelation. According to Altman, “the songs themselves serve here as a vehicle of ascent to Heaven.”⁶²

Although the Jewish anxiety about changing anything which “stands written” hindered the writing of personal prayers, in Hassidic circles it was common to compose spontaneous oral prayers.⁶³ In contrast to Kabbalists, who were studying the secrets of the divine world by means of interpretation of the Torah, the Hassidim developed individual prayer, story, singing and dance as mystical activities. This was a later development, even inside Hassidism. Seclusion, going out to nature, love — these were sometimes considered to be aids to the mystical process, but not its independent motivations.

Special to Jewish mysticism is the concept of Hebrew language (all its components included) as a revelation of God’s essence.⁶⁴ Perhaps the mere use of this sacred language, which for Diaspora Jews was high and mysterious like poetic language, loaded with multi-level interpretations, could fulfill the need to express mystical exaltation. The sacredness of the Torah’s language can explain the frequency of the mystical midrash genre in classical Jewish mysticism: the mere reading of the sacred text was, perhaps, a trigger for a mystical experience.

60 Altman, “Sacred Poems,” p. 44.

61 Ibid., p. 45.

62 Ibid., p. p. 46.

63 Meizl, *Tiferet Uziel*, p. 53; Nahman of Braslav, *Likutei*, p. 105.

64 Idel, *Abulafia*, pp. 23-43; Liebes, *The Teaching of Creation*, pp. 16-30.

Modern Hebrew Literature

The sacred status of Hebrew language disappeared when it became a living language. For a contemporaneous Israeli poet the mere writing in Hebrew is not an activity which can bring one closer to sacredness. In order to describe the mystical experience, the Israeli poet cannot depend on the power of a citation from the Torah either. He must find other means. The system of symbols and ideas, which was developed by traditional Jewish mysticism, is not sufficient for him any more. As a modern writer he wishes to express his unique personal experiences, to draw the mystic picture in a new, original way. Modern mystical poetry is then idiosyncratic and daring. It also links the modern reader to the sources of both Jewish and non-Jewish mysticism.

In English anthologies of mystical poetry one can find texts from various, far-away cultures, but no hint of modern Hebrew poetry.⁶⁵ Gershom Scholem in his aforementioned “Reflections on the Possibility of Mysticism Today” pointed at Aharon David Gordon (1856-1922) as a possible modern secular mystic, but did not hesitate to mention Walt Whitman as an example of a modern mystical poet. Scholem wrote:

A hundred years ago Walt Whitman sang the song of America from an absolute secular point of view [but] with a feeling of absolute sacredness. Walt Whitman is a conspicuous example for a phenomenon, which had many representatives during the last three generations. They realized that mystical experiences can still appear and grow in human beings, for this is an inherent human experience, which relates to the very essence of the human being, as long as it exists.⁶⁶

Did Scholem take it for granted that mysticism without belief in God is possible for non-Jews only? This is not the case, for he wrote that Kafka’s writings are “a secular representation of a Kabbalistic reality.”⁶⁷ Elsewhere Scholem called

65 In Albertson’s anthology, *Lyra Mystica* (1932) the Hebrew poets are King David (the psalms) and Shlomo Ibn Gabirol.

66 Scholem, *Explications and Implications*, vol 1, p. 82.

67 Cited by Biale, *Gershom Scholem*, p. 215.

Kafka “the last inheritor of the Jewish mystical tradition.”⁶⁸ Moshe Idel concluded his book *Kabbalah: New Horizons* by referring to Kafka’s story “In Front of the Law” (also included in his novel *The Process*) as “an enlightening witness of Jewish mysticism’s remnants, still existent in a world where the confidence in human [mystical] activity collapsed,”⁶⁹ thus implying a distinction between a text which testifies to the authentic mystical experience of its writer and one which is only remotely connected to Jewish mysticism. In modern Hebrew literature there are many additional examples, clearer than Whitman and Kafka, of mysticism in modern Jewish literature. A few scholars of Jewish mysticism have been conscious of this fact, but they mentioned it only briefly.⁷⁰

Literary research about mysticism in modern Hebrew literature has been generally dedicated to one work of literature or to the work of one writer, without a perspective on the whole field. The basis for such research was either inter-textual or biographical. There has been almost no examination of the mystical experience as it is described in the text, of its unique formulation and of its connection with non-Jewish mystical traditions with which the writer had been acquainted.⁷¹

This was not only a result of the conventions which dominated the academic research of Jewish mysticism, but also of the conventions which dominated the scholarship of modern Hebrew literature since the foundation of Israel. When the Zionist messianic mood was transformed into a battle over everyday survival and technological progress, Israeli writers and thinkers rejected mystical ideas and moods and expressed post-Holocaust and post-War crises of beliefs and ideologies. They tended to adopt French Existentialist

68 Schoelm, *Kabbalah*, p. 17.

69 Idel, *New Perspectives*, p. 283. See also Alter, “Kafka as Kabbalist.”

70 See Oron, “Symbols”; idem, “Mystical Elements”; idem, “Death in the Zohar”; Elijor, “Covering and Uncovering”; Liebes, “Zohar and Ratosch”; idem, *The Teaching of Creation*; Dan, *The Heart and the Fountain*.

71 Bialik’s poem “He Peeped and Died” is an exception. See Kurzweil, “He Peeped and Died”; Dan, “He Peeped and Died”; Lurie, “He Peeped and Died”; Luz, “He Peeped and Died”; Peles, “He Peeped and Died”; Barzel, “He Peeped and Died.” See also Barzel, *Mystery in Sh. Shalom’s Poetry*; Tsurit, *Amir Gilboa*; Minz-Manor, “Gilboa”; Lipsker, “Amira Hess”; Idem, *Sh. Shalom*; Liebes, “Zohar and Ratosch”; Rubinshtein, *Yehoshua Bar-Yosef*; Zimmerman, *Alterman*; idem, *Bialik*; Shalev, Alterman’s “The Joy of the Poor”; Lidovsky-Cohen, “Yona Wollach.”

philosophy and Anglo-American literary modernism. Some members of this generation, sometimes named “the state generation,” were educated by leftist youth movements; others were refugees from Western Europe. They rejected the ecstatic tone in literature, together with any belief in abstract values, preferring ironic tones, spoken language and images from everyday life. These preferences were common both to writers of literature and to dominant, influential literary critics, such as Nathan Zach, Binyamin Hrushovsky (Harshav), Gavriel Moked, Dan Miron and Shimon Sandbank. For them the word “mysticism” had pejorative connotations. These approaches, which were dominant in criticism and in research of Israeli literature, led to readings which were deaf to mystical elements.

In 1960s Baruch Kurzweil, an influential religious critic and scholar, wrote that modern Hebrew literature since the *haskalah* period (namely since the late 18th century) has distanced itself from its Jewish tradition and beliefs.⁷² And in fact, even today modern Hebrew literature is considered, especially within Israeli religious circles, to be a product of Zionist secular culture, which feeds the reader with ideas which are harmful to his Jewish life. From this point of view the *haskalah* movement and literature are looked at as the source of all the sins of secular Judaism.⁷³

In fact, modern Hebrew literature was created in a Zionist cultural context which, on the one hand, treated with suspicion extreme irrational moods and rejected the belief in any transcendent reality, but on the other hand absorbed neo-Romanticist and modernist attraction to mysticism, which led Jewish writers to the sources of Jewish mysticism. In the 1950s-1960s Israeli poetry turned to a direction which opposed mystical moods. The main representatives of this trend were Yehuda Amichai, Nathan Zach, David Avidan and Dan Pagis. At the same time, however, Dalia Rabikovich and Amir Gilboa were writing mystical poetry. (Reciprocally, in a period when central poets such as Bialik, Shlonsky, Alterman, Greenberg, Lamdan and Raab expressed mystical ecstasies, there were poets of opposite tendencies, such as Tchernikhovsky, Vogel, Yaakov Steinberg and Yaakov Fichman).

72 Kurzweil, *Elementary Problems*, pp. 13-32.

73 Bar-Yosef, “*Haskala* literature,” esp. p. 2.

Many view Zionist culture as if it was the opposite pole of traditional Judaism, modern Hebrew literature being its mouthpiece.⁷⁴ Jewish terms and symbols in Zionist discourse were understood as if they were a hollow political manipulation, devoid of real religious contents.⁷⁵ Others have found in Zionism, especially in the second *aliya* (1904-1914), contacts with Hassidism and a wish to continue its values.⁷⁶ For example, the writings of A.D. Gordon, the major spiritual leader of the *Avoda* movement, bear the clear stamp of Hassidism.⁷⁷ Many early 20th century Zionist writers came from Hassidic families, and sometimes the distance from their homes strengthened the nostalgia to the lost Jewish life and the wish to find a continuation to the tradition of Jewish sacredness in the new reality. For example, Avraham Shlonsky and Uri Zvi Greenberg described the Zionist pioneer's experiences as a transformation of the Jewish sacred rituals.⁷⁸ The Zionist educational system, both formal and informal (the youth movements) cultivated the value of the land's sacredness, which was expressed in the literary works of Israeli-born writers, such as S. Yizhar, O. Hillel and Hayim Guri. It is possible, of course, to say that these writers used terms of Jewish sacredness metaphorically, devoid of their real religious contents, but — as argued above — it is not simple to prove it.

During the early- and mid-20th century observant writers, such as Rabbi Kook, Yosef Zvi Rimmon and Zelda (Schneiurson-Mishkovsky), were writing and publishing mystical Hebrew poetry in Eretz-Israel, simultaneously with non-observant writers. At the turn of the 21st century the contacts between Israeli literature and mysticism were getting firmer, mysticism attracting to it even writers who began their writing career far away from the world of mysticism. During the last third of the 20th century the number of young observant Israeli writers has been steadily growing, and the majority of them write mystical poems.

74 Dan, *the Heart and the Fountain*, pp. 63-65.

75 Don-Yihya, "Secularization and Judaism."

76 Almog, "Religious Values"; Shapira, "Religious Motifs."

77 Shapira, *A.D. Gordon*.

78 Bar-Yosef, "The Sacred Land."

The Traces of Western Literature

Mystical elements in 20th century Hebrew literature have roots not only in Jewish, but also in non-Jewish, especially Christian, mysticism. Mysticism penetrated Hebrew literature through literary movements in Europe, especially Romanticism and Symbolism. Romantic poets often described the yearnings for unity with primary sources of sacredness and the moments of extreme spiritual ecstasy.

Mystical experiences in both Romantic and Symbolist literatures were shaped according to the relevant cultural contexts: these literary movements had tight contacts with Christianity in general, and with Christian Middle Ages mysticism in particular, sometimes blurring the borders between early Christianity and Judaism or between Christian and Jewish Kabbalah. Accordingly, sacredness was attributed to suffering, sacrifice, altruism and the internalization of religious life. Romanticism also inherited from Christian mystical and apocalyptic theory motifs such as the pilgrimage, the light, spiritual love, and redemption through catastrophe. In Romanticism the traditional religious value of asceticism, holy study, prayer and learning the scriptures, was almost deleted, together with the semi-scientific, cosmological elements characteristic of Jewish and Christian Kabbalah.

Romantic mysticism attributed to the poet qualities which until that time were attributed to the mystic. The Romantics viewed the poet as a person who lived on a different, higher level of reality. Love, inner freedom, contact with nature, artistic inspiration, internal voyage to the world of imagination and of childhood — these are some of the experiences which Romantic literature described as mystical. To them were added values which were connected with the political role of Romanticism: folkways and social non-conformity. In contrast to religious mysticism, where such practices could only be a starting point or an aid to mystical process, in Romantic poetry sacredness was to be found in these situations for themselves.

Western Symbolism, originally French, was to a certain extent a continuation of Romanticism (hence its alternative name, “neo-Romanticism”).

However, it brought new elements: in contrast to the Romantic cult of Nature, it emphasized the sacredness of the aesthetic experience and its artful expression; in contrast to Romantic cult of revival it sanctified self-annihilation; in contrast to Romantic belief in natural self expression, it discovered the inexpressible nature of the Sacred. Symbolism focused on elements which were peripheral in Romanticism: the magic role of the poetic language, the Dionysian masculine ecstasy, the paradoxical nature of reality, the metaphysical status of Evil, the cancellation of conventional ethics. Russian Symbolism (based on Eastern Orthodox Christianity) added motifs of asceticism and sacrifice, strengthened apocalyptic motifs and emphasized the feminine character of the Divine world. The creators of modern Hebrew literature knew European and Russian literature as well as Jewish mysticism. The fact that Christian motifs penetrated Jewish mysticism enabled them to combine the two traditions, and to make their literary work an inter-cultural bridge.

Three Basic Elements

Beginning in the 17th century European scholars of mysticism approached mystical phenomena from the theological point of view. During the 19th century sociological and anthropological researches appeared. The emotional aspect of mysticism became a focus of academic interest in the 20th century. Scholars have been trying to define and classify the emotional characteristics of the mystical experience; the situations which support and motivate its appearance; the activities which enable it; and its physical symptoms.⁷⁹ At the same time there has been a growing consciousness of the influence of the cultural and religious background of mystics and scholars on

79 On approaches to research of mysticism see McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, pp. 266-343. On the history of mysticism scholarship see Margolin, *The Temple of Man*, pp. 3-54. On the general characteristics of the mystical experience see Bucke, *Cosmic Consciousness*; James, *The Religious Experience*; Underhill, *Mysticism*; Lasky, *Ecstasy*; Heiler, *Prayer*; Hollenback, *Mysticism*, pp. 40-74; Merkur, *Unitive Experience*; Sharfshtein, *The Mystical Experience*; Deikman, "Deautomatization." Criticism of the theological approach and recommendation to focus on the emotional aspect of mysticism by using semiotic, literary and psychological methods - see Idel, "Unio Mystica as a Criterion."

their understanding and verbalization of the mystical experience, and to the difference between inner-cultural (of mystics and those who share their world view) and outer-cultural (of scholars who belong to another culture) views of mysticism.⁸⁰ These developments in the scholarship of mysticism enable us to acknowledge the mystical nature of experiences which were described by Hebrew poets and prose writers during the 20th century. They also encourage the examination of these texts in their cultural contexts.

Jewish mysticism was also examined at first from a theosophical or sociological point of view. Since the late 1980s, interest in Jewish mysticism as an emotional and physical phenomenon began to grow. Contemporary scholars of Jewish mysticism acknowledge the fact that mystical experiences include not only beliefs but also strong emotions, and between these two components there are inseparable interconnections.⁸¹

Research on Jewish mysticism partly focuses on characteristics which are common to Jewish and non-Jewish mysticism, and partly emphasizes the uniqueness of Jewish mysticism in comparison to and in contrast with general mysticism, as it was defined by scholars of Christian backgrounds. Among the studies one can find objections even to the use of the term “mysticism” in the Jewish context, and preference for the term “*hamistorin ha-yeudi*” (Jewish mystery).⁸² However, all scholars of Jewish mysticism agree that in spite of its unique character, Jewish mysticism absorbed various elements of contemporary non-Jewish culture. Throughout its long history, Jewish mysticism included elements which — from the emotional point of view — were common to general mysticism, although formulated by specific Jewish language.⁸³ According to this approach, the mystical experience in modern Hebrew poetry will be examined according to its emotional universal characteristics, according to its unique style and according to the autobiographical and cultural background of the poet.

80 See Smart, “Interpretation.”

81 On interconnections between the emotional and theological components in the teaching of the BESHT see Etkes, “The BESHT as a Mystic,” p. 421.

82 Dan, *The Heart and the Fountain*, p. 9; Liebes, “Reflections”; Pedaia, “Interview,” p. 171.

83 See, for example, Idel, *New Perspectives*, pp. 75-91; idem., “Universalization and Integration”; Liebes, “Christian influences on the Zohar”; Wolfson, *Through a Spectrum*.

Many scholars tried to list the elements of the mystical experience.⁸⁴ The presence and the relative importance of each element are the subjects of continuing debate, but it is clear to all that this experience is a strong and short inner occurrence, and that its composition is of a cluster of interconnected characteristics. The majority of scholars agree on three elements whose presence in and importance to the mystical experience, both Jewish and non-Jewish, is clear:⁸⁵

a) Unity with sacredness

b) Ecstasy

c) Visions and other concrete perceptions which symbolically express the meeting with the sacred world.

None of these three components, when it appears in a text separately, is enough to form a basis for the argument that the text is mystical. The mystical experience I am interested in is neither a non-ecstatic continuing contact with sacredness nor an abnormal extreme ecstatic mood which does not have a sacred goal (such as hysteria, a trance, or an obsession), nor any symbolic description of visions which does not include a yearning for the unity with sacredness. Although I shall focus on each of the three components separately, the poems which will be examined here include all of the three, in different dosages.

84 See, for example, James, *The Religious Experience*, pp. 249-251; Underhill, *Mysticism*, pp. 70-80; Hollenback, *Mysticism*, pp. 40-41. For a review and an analysis of the disagreements see Merkur, "Unitive Experience."

85 Scholars of mysticism tend to discuss one the following three elements while including in it other elements. For example, to discuss "ecstasy" together with unity (Underhill, *Mysticism*, pp. 379-358; Buber, *Ecstatic Confessions*; Lasky, *Ecstasy*), or to discuss unity together with ecstasy (Idel, "Universalization and Integration"), or to discuss symbolic visions together with ecstasy (Pedaia, *The Vision and the Speech*). The reason is that these elements are co-present in the mystical experience.

Identifying Mysticism in Modern Poetry

The multi-level, metaphoric nature of the literary text, especially of poetry, makes it possible to avoid its mystical character. However, a reader learned in mysticism will generally be sensitive (sometimes oversensitive) to the mystical meaning of a poem. What makes a poem worthy of being included in an anthology of mystical poems?

We have tried to answer this question from a theoretical point of view; now we shall examine a few examples. Here is a fragment of text which was found among the posthumous literary works of Avraham Ben-Yitzhak. Ben-Yitzhak (the pen-name of Avraham Sonne, 1883-1950) lived a secular life, but was acquainted with traditional Jewish literature, including Kabbalah and Hassidism. This fragment in its original Hebrew contains four words only: /נעלה נרות הרוח: במחשכינו⁸⁶. The English literal translation is: “We shall (or perhaps: Let us) raise (or: kindle) the spirit’s (or: the wind’s) candles/ in our darknesses [sic!].” This is a poetic text. The words are ambiguous and loaded with connotations. The sounds are musical: there are alliterations of N and R, and if the poem is read in Ashkenazi accentuation (which Ben-Yitzhak apparently used), a Homeric dactyl can be heard, which is amazing to find in such a small text. Well known symbols (light-darkness) are used in an original way: the light is of *inner* candles, which we have to raise or kindle *in ourselves*. There is no allusion to Kabbalistic or Hassidic text. The writer was not a religious person in the conventional sense of the word. Still, without the aid of biographical or inter-textual aids, this text can be read as a mystical poetic text. Why?

This tiny text creates an atmosphere of mystery, by the image of candles flickering in the darkness. Ben-Yitzhak expressed his feeling that “we” live in a spiritual darkness, devoid of sacredness. He expressed the need to be redeemed of this “darkness” by “raising the candles of spirit.” “Light” here cannot be interpreted as referring to Enlightenment, because this is a light that should be kindled from within, without external movement; sun, not candles, would be the appropriate symbol for the light of Enlightenment. In the Bible light is

86 Ben-Yitzhak, *Poems*, p. 35.

God's first creation. Here the readers are called to create their own light, in a moment when they feel God-like. In raising the spirit's lights we are supposed to transform our inner world, which here has mythic, cosmic dimensions. Thus the border between the human and the divine is blurred. These traits connect this tiny literary fragment to the tradition of mystical expression.

For a fuller understanding of this fragmental text, we should also pay attention to its contemporaneous traits. The unusual (in mystical texts) use of the plural ("we") reflects Ben-Yitzhak's double cultural context: on the one hand Western European early modernism, with its individualism and pessimism, and on the other hand Zionism and neo-Hassidism, where togetherness was sacred (see ch. 5). The poet sees redemption as a collective act, overcoming the individuality of the modern artist and intellectual. The symbol of candles hints at the importance of roots in the religious tradition. In the Zionist cultural context, work and dance functioned as redemptive activities. In contrast, the poet proposed here a non-physical, purely spiritual redemption. The word *na'aleh* (we shall raise/let us raise/ let us kindle) is of special interest here, as it can also be understood as: let us make *aliya*. Ben-Yitzhak, however, proposed a non-conventional *aliya*, which has nothing to do with the external, secular aims of Zionism. This fragment is then both a continuation of mystical tradition and a modern, contemporary piece of literature.

Let us now look at one of Avraham Ben-Yitzhak's full-fledged poems, "The Lonely Say."⁸⁷

יום ליום ינחיל שמש דועקת
 ולילה על לילה יקונו.
 וקיץ אחר קיץ יאסף בשלכת
 ועולם מצערו מתרונן.
 ומחר נמות, ואין הדבר בננו,
 וכיום צאתנו נעמד לפני שער עם נעילה.
 ולב כי יעלז: הן אלהים קרבנו,
 והתנחם וחרד מפני המעילה.

87 Ben-Yitzhak, *Poems*, pp. 64-67. The poem was first published in 1917, earlier versions from 1910 and 1914 were found in his posthumous writings.

יום ליום ישא שמש בוערת
 וְלַיְלָה אַחַר לַיְלָה יִשְׁפֹךְ כּוֹכָבִים,
 עַל שִׁפְתַי בּוֹדְדִים שִׁירָה נִעְצָרֶת:
 בְּשִׁבְעַ דְּרָכִים נִתְפָּלֵג וּבְאַחַד אָנוּ שָׁבִים.

In literal translation : “Day to day bequeaths a glimmering sun/ and night laments for night/ And summer after summer is gathered up in leaf fall/ And the world is singing from its sorrow.//

And tomorrow we shall die wordless/ And the same as on the day of parting we shall stand before the gate at closing time/ And if the heart rejoices: indeed God has brought us close [to Him]/ It will then repent [from joy] and will tremble in fear of treachery (betrayal)// Day to day bears (carries) a burning sun/ And night after night pours out stars, / Upon the lips of the lonely (the few) song comes to a halt:/ Into seven paths we divide (part), and by one (One) we return.”⁸⁸

Former interpretations of this poem saw its thematic center in the poet's loneliness, or in his consciousness of death, or in the artist's silence, or in the traumas of the First World War.⁸⁹ These interpretations avoided the fact that the point of view of the speaker in this poem is located not on earth, but in a much higher point, from which it is possible to see the whole cosmos, the changes of the celestial bodies, and even the gate which leads to the divine space. In earlier versions of this poem more terrestrial images appeared, but the poet “cleaned” these details in this final version.⁹⁰ The upper space which is revealed here is the characteristic space seen by the mystic, which includes all the worlds, where man and God act reciprocally. The poem's space is the border or the passage between the human and the divine words, which is central in mysticism.

In the three first lines of the poem we see all of existence in a depressing, monotonous, unchangeable situation. We are confronted with existential, metaphysical decadence. The world is withering, crushed and trampled. This situation seems unchangeable, for it is an incurably sad inheritance, which the

88 This translation is based on Dan Pagis' translation and interpretation of this poem in Burnshaw et als., *The Modern Hebrew Poem Itself*, pp. 58-59.

89 Aran, *With Poems and Poets*, p. 20; Even-Zohar, *Literary Criticism*, pp. 42-46; Pagis pp. 58-59; Hever, *The Blossom of Silence*, pp. 98-99.

90 See Ben-Yitzhak, *Poems*, p. 66.

days and the seasons “bequeath” to each other. In the fourth line, however, a miracle happens. Paradoxically, from the depths of sorrow a cosmic celestial music, perhaps the singing of the angels, is bursting forth, as if darkness is a condition to the creation of light. This is a well known mystical motif.

In the second stanza the human condition is presented in the moment of death, when we stand on the border between the two worlds. Can we “rejoice” in such a moment? The third line of this stanza states that contact with God can give man a feeling of joy, even if it will happen only after death. However, this contact is doubtful. “We” are standing before the gate at closing time, an image well known from Kafka’s “In Front of the Law.” The source of this image, common to Kafka and Ben-Yitzhak, is the *ne’ila* (closing) Yom Kippur prayer: “Open to us a gate/ in the closing time of the gate.” Why is the gate not open for us in Ben-Yitzhak’s poem? Because we stand before it “*ve-ein ha-diber banu*” — without words, and also without having fulfilled the commandments (“*diber*” in Hebrew means both speech and one of the Ten Commandments), namely we have no moral sacredness, which can be achieved by fulfilling the commandments. The joyful expectations to the contact with God therefore retreat, and the fear of “betrayal” comes instead.

The word “*me’ila*” (betrayal, playing with the sound of “*ne’ila*”) here is connected with the biblical sin of the eating from the sacrifice which was brought to the temple,⁹¹ and even more so with mishnaic discussion of the possibility that the priest himself would eat from the sacrifice instead of using it only for the sacred ritual.⁹² The poet uses these allusions in order to hint at his contemporaries’ (and his own) betrayals or abuses of their sacred duties and beliefs, maybe also of their lives, which are devoid of purity. This is why the upper gate is closed before them.

The third stanza begins with a wonderful change of atmosphere from pessimism into ecstasy: the sun is not just glimmering, it burns, and its fire is carried on by the days, alluding to “Day to Day will express a speech” (Psalms 19:3). The nights generously pour their stars, alluding to “I’ll pour my sayings before you” (Psalms 142:3). The lonely ones stand before the gate without

91 Leviticus 5:15-16.

92 Albek, *Mishna*, Kodoshim, pp. 269-288.

knowing whether they can join the divine singing, or they will be punished of their “betrayal,” and be left outside, with no speech and no commandments. The song in their mouths stops, but at the same time they also sing together their mysterious, sacred song, whose words conclude the poem: “In seven paths/ways we part and in one we return.”

In this last line of the poem there is an interesting grammatical discrepancy: “*derekh*” (way, path) in Hebrew is generally used in the feminine (although it is occasionally used as masculine as well), so it’s possible to say “*sheva drakhim*” (seven paths), using “seven” in the feminine form, but then it says “*u-ve-ekhad*” using “one” in the masculine! Why? This raises the possibility that the word “one” should not be understood literally, that it hints to something more than a mere number. “One” is the concluding word of the *Shema Yisrael* prayer, the cardinal Jewish prayer, which should also be said before death. “To die in One” is an expression for a martyr’s death “on *Kiddush ha-Shem*” (originally said regarding Rabbi Akiva).⁹³ “One” can also be used for the name of God.

What, then, is the meaning of “*u-ve-ekhad*” here? Like the seven divine spheres, which are separated, but will bring redemption through their unity with the One, the lonely ones, when they return together from their separated ways, reach a sacred unity. This unity is their hope for correspondence with the sacred, their chance to enter the divine gate.

The unity of the “we” here is neither national nor social (thus this poem deviates from popular Zionist conventions). It is a spiritual unity of these lonely intellectuals and artists who wish to express sacred poetry. In contrast to its folkloric character in Hassidism, which was popular in contemporary Hebrew literature, Ben-Yitzhak takes mysticism back to its aristocratic, esoteric, secluded place in Western-Christian tradition and in Kabbalah. The poetic polished form of this poem and the patterns of paradox which organize its structure speak of Symbolist influence, which Ben-Yitzhak could have inherited from Rilke’s poetry.

In order to sharpen the distinction between a mystical and a non-mystical modern poem, let us now briefly compare two poems which present the same situation: both describe a landscape a short time after the rain has stopped.

93 Berakhot 61 p. 2.

Both were written by secular poets. The first is an untitled poem by David Vogel (1899-1944), from his book *Before the Dark Gate* (Vienna 1923)⁹⁴, the second is the poem "Birth" by Amir Gilboa (1917-1984), from his book *Poems in the Morning in the Morning* (Tel-Aviv 1953).⁹⁵

*

אחר הגשם
רפרף תמהון בהיר
על השדות החרדים.

רוח חתר כהה
בין קפלי דגל חור

ובין אשכולות נצה סגלה.

עננים נוסעים נסכו קרעי לכן
אל הברכה הנכאה.

ורעפי גג
שחקו אדמים
תוך דמעות.

*

After the rain
bright astonishment hovered
upon the worried fields.

A wind broke dark
into the pale flag's pleats.

Traveling clouds offered tatters of whiteness
To the gloomy lake.

And tiles
slightly laughed
red, within tears.

94 Vogel, *Poems*, p. 52.

95 Gilboa, *Poems*, vol. 1, p. 198. Translated by Mintz, *Modern Hebrew Poetry*, p. 252.

הולדת

הגשם חלף.

והוא עוד מגגות ומעצים

מזמר על ראשי

בהנומה כחלחלת.

אשריך, אלהי,

ברשתך נצוד הילד.

הנה אקריב

עלה אל עלה

ואראה איך מכסה עלה על עלה

ומתמזגים הרסיסים.

ואקרא לכלולות משמי

את הרסיסים.

וכל חלוני

אעטר עצים.

אשריך, אלהי,

ברשתך נצוד הילד.

אני פוקח את עיני —

אדמתי רחבה מאד

וכלה מקשה

של פטורי ציצים

ירקים.

הו אלהי, איך היינו חבוקים!

Birth

The rain has passed.
 And yet from roofs and trees
 It sings in my ears
 And covers my head with a bluish bridal-veil.

Good for you, my God,
 In your net the child has been caught.
 Now I shall bring leaf close to leaf

Watch how leaf covers leaf
And the drops join,
Then I will call the swallows
To betrothal from my sky,
And crown my windows with flower pots.

Good for you, My God,
In your net the child has been caught
I open my eyes —
My earth is very wide
And all a beaten work of knobby buds,
Green.
Oh my God, how embraced we have been.

(translated by Ruth Feiner Mintz)

Which of these two poems is a mystical poem, and why? In spite of the similar basic image — a landscape after the rain has stopped — Gilboa's is a mystical poem and Vogel's is not.

Gilboa's poem opens with the words: "The rain has passed," an allusion to the Song of Songs 2:11. The Song of Songs is the most important biblical source of mystical *midrash* in the *Zohar*. In the second stanza, the sky is compared to a pale blue bridal veil which covers the poet. The poet thus becomes a mythological bride, preparing herself for a wedding. To whom? The image of erotic unity is postponed for a while. In the next stanza the poet turns to God. He calls him "my God," thus pointing at his intimate relationship with Him. The sky now turns from a celestial bridal veil into a butterfly net, in which the poet is caught. What was caught is the child who is hidden in the poet's soul. This is his hidden part, which is still sometimes capable of contact with the sacred dimension of reality. This sacredness is the net, in which the poet's soul has been caught. Surprisingly daring, the poet congratulates God for His achievement: "Good for you (happy are You), my God," alluding to "Good for you, Bar-Yohai" with its mystical connotation: Bar-Yohai is traditionally considered to be the author of the *Zohar*. Divine joy is filling the world and sweeps the poet into it. The "child" is swallowed by the divine veil, losing his grown-up identity.

From here on we follow the play of the child, trying to do the impossible: to unite leaves and to mix the fragments of water into one. This is the play of unity. The play is described in almost nonsensical language, intensively repeating the sounds LE and SIM, as if the language has turned into pure music or into nonsense word play. Or maybe these are magical words? Language itself takes part in the creation of joy, happiness and merriment. The poet-child is crowning his windows with flower-pots and invites the swallows to his wedding, while the identity of the bridegroom is still not clear. Here he repeats his grateful congratulation to “my God,” and simultaneously it becomes clear that all this was a vision which was revealed to the poet while his eyes were closed. When he opens his eyes the landscape becomes unreal: it is endless (“very wide”), completely homogenous, resembling a temple with its “*pturei tsitsim*” (golden flower stocks) which were beautifully holding together the wood walls in Solomon’s temple (Kings I 6:18). The poet, however, sees these flower stocks as “green,” living and growing like real plants, as if a miracle happened to the temple flower stocks and they started to live. The poet indirectly expresses the feeling of inner revival, characteristic of mystical experience. The ending of the poem is a clear image of unity with God in love: “Oh, God! How we were embraced!” Not only the image but also the tone (especially the cry “Oh!”) is of mystical ecstasy.

In Vogel’s poem we see fragments of realistic nature. It is full of hovering movements, not having clear direction. Even the clouds move both vertically and horizontally. The colors are vague: dark (not black), pale (not white), violet. The emotional atmosphere is full of weakness: the tiles “*sokhakim*” (slightly laugh) from tears (not from a cry), like a child whose weeping changes quickly into laughter. There is a slight hint of contact between heaven and earth: the clouds pour their whiteness into the sad lake, but this whiteness is made of tatters, it is not whole or perfect, and the pool does not respond to this invitation to unity. Thus the poem cancels the possibility of ecstatic unity between the world and denies even a strong yearning for such a unity.

In this context, style elements are less important for the classification of a mystical poem than its emotional and philosophical contents. After all, elements such as images, musicality and rhetoric function differently in different poems. They lead the reader to the mystical experience only if they are part

of the total emotional and thematic system. The mystical experience can be expressed by different styles. It does not have specific stylistic devices which produce it automatically. The use of traditional mystical elements of style does not guarantee that the poem expresses a mystical experience, and vice versa: a poem can seem to be devoid of traditional mystical elements of style, and still express a deep mystical experience. Haviva Pedaia put it thus: “a poem might not include even one mystical metaphor, but still be a mystical poem.”⁹⁶

96 Pedaia, “Interview,” p. 174.

CHAPTER TWO

How did Mysticism Penetrate
into Modern Hebrew Literature?

Jewish Mysticism and the *Haskalah* Movement

If the founders of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* — the pioneers of Jewish studies in 19th century Germany — could be here today, they would be surprised to see that Jewish mysticism is now a legitimate part of Jewish studies, accepted in its own right. Their own method was to research the Jewish past on the basis of “pure scientific truth, which considers each detail, each period and each text as equally important.”¹ Scholem wrote that the research on Kabbalah by German and Russian *masskilim* throughout the 19th century “gave birth only to works of lesser value, the majority of which were aimed only for the need of polemics.”² In fact, German *masskilim* founded the research on Kabbalah.³ For example, Aharon-Adolf Jelinek (1821-1893) from Prague wrote a few books in German on Kabbalah, edited Kabbalistic texts and translated Adolphe Franck’s influential book *Le Kabbale ou la philosophie religieuse des Hébreux* (1843) into German.

However, in spite of their declared scientific project, which supported equal treatment of all the sources of Jewish history, the scholars of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* belittled the irrational forces which were active in Judaism. They appreciated only the “enlightened” aspects of the religion. Jewish mysticism was, for them — even when they uncovered and examined some of its parts — an obscurant, retarded deviation from Judaism. They regarded it as “an alien corn” to Judaism’s essence. Their basic rationalistic views, their wish to justify Judaism in the eyes of European intellectuals, their low esteem of Eastern European Jews and of Eastern cultures in general, can explain their

1 Schorch, *The Turn to the Past*, pp. 204-205.

2 Scholem, “kabbala” in *Encyclopedia Ivrit*, p. *

3 On the interest of German *masskilim* in Kabbalah see Idel, *New Perspectives*, pp. 19-28; Hurvitz, “Mendelssohn and Kabbalah”; Weiss, “Wissenschaft des Judentums”; Schulte, “Kabbalah in Solomon Maimons.”

alienation from Jewish mysticism.⁴ Their disregard, suspicion and hostility toward Hassidism were based on a perceived connection between Hassidism and dangerous Sabbateanism.⁵ About a hundred years later, Scholem blamed these scholars for preparing “a scientific burial” for Kabbalah.⁶

And in fact during the 19th century the majority of *masskilim* in both Germany and Russia considered mysticism dangerous and alien to Judaism. *Even Negef* (The Stumbling Block) and *Even haTo'im* (The Place of Mistakes) — David Kahana's two books on Kabbalah, Sabbateanism and Hassidism, which both appeared in 1873 — represent this stance. Kabbalah was less denigrated by the *masskilim* than Sabbateanism, Frankism and Hassidism, perhaps, because of its status in the Christian world and because of its elitism.

Russian *masskilim* considered Hassidism, like Sabbateanism and Frankism, to be a “sect” (*sekta*, in Russian, *kat*, in Hebrew), with all the negative connotation of the word.⁷ In the mid-19th century, Hassidism, Sabbateanism and Frankism (the latter was of special interest in Poland) were criticized in the Russian and Polish press even more than they were in Jewish writings of the same era in Czarist Russia, under the pressure of the authorities' policy of Jewish assimilation.⁸ “The Tsadiks - Enemies of Jewish Enlightenment” — an essay which appeared in 1880 in the Russian periodical *Almanch Novorossiskii Telegrap* — represents the approach of these publications to Hassidism.⁹

Criticism of Hassidism from a progressive social point of view is characteristic of these publications as well as of scholarly works written by Russian

4 Ettinger, “The Scholarship of Hassidism”; Anidjar, *Jewish Mysticism*.

5 Verses, *Haskalah and Shabta'ut*, pp. 133-145, 265-267.

6 Scholem, “Reflections on *Wissenschaft des Judentums*,” p. 392.

7 For example: “Four *katot* cannot host the Shekhina: *kat* of the frivolous [leitsim], *kat* of the hypocrites, *kat* of the liars, and *kat* of the gossipers” (Bavli, Sotta page 42a). See Mahler, *Hasidut and haskalah*, p. 78; Hundert, “The Conditions,” pp. 45-46.

8 Scholem's *Bibliographia Kabbalistica* (Berlin 1933) includes about half a dozen journalistic items in Polish, all of them about the Frankist, 22 in Russian and one in Ukrainian, the majority about Hassids and Hassidism (*ibid.*, pp. 8-11. This list is based on the bibliographical list of Jewish publications prepared by Adolph Landau, the editor of the Russian-Jewish monthly, *Voskhod*. Two more books in Polish are mentioned in Shiffer, *History of Hassidism*. Shiffer's research already includes the change of attitude to Hassidism at the turn of the 20th century.

9 Scholem, *Bibliographia Kabbalistica*, p. 11.

Jews. Thus in 1854 Moissei Berlin, invited by the Russian Department of Foreign Relations, wrote a 131-page research article under the title “The History of Hassidism,” in which he examined the phenomenon from the point of view of utilitarian liberalism.¹⁰ The Jewish historian Ilia Orshansky in his essay “Reflections on Hassidism” (first published in the Jewish-Russian periodical *Den’* in 1871) introduced Hassidism as a deviation from the authentic Jewish spirit. Orshansky found in Polish Hassidism traces of popular Polish Catholicism, and in Kabbalah superstitious obscurantism.¹¹ He acknowledged the positive spiritual and moral impulses which motivated its birth, and even saw Hassidism as a surrogate for the liberal reforms which were demanded of contemporary Judaism in Russia.¹² Zweifel’s defense of Hassidism in his Hebrew book *Shalom al Israel* (Peace unto Israel, 1863-1873) is exceptional. Here too Hassidism is viewed not as a mystical movement but as a social phenomenon.¹³

When, where and why did the rehabilitation of Jewish mysticism take place? This turn is often ascribed to Gershom Scholem, “the founder of modern Kabbala research,”¹⁴ “who turned the research of [Jewish] mysticism into a legitimate field in Jewish studies.”¹⁵ In Germany, Martin Buber anticipated Scholem in legitimizing Jewish mysticism as part of Jewish spiritual creativity. Buber saw Hassidism, not Kabbalah, as the movement which brought Jewish mysticism to its highest point. On Hassidism Buber built his vision of Jewish and universal spiritual-moral revival.

Scholem’s and Buber’s new vision of Jewish mysticism was inspired by early 20th century German neo-Romanticism.¹⁶ It also had a firm background in Russian neo-mysticism, which influenced Jewish high culture in Russia.

10 Schedrin, *Memoranda Literature*.

11 *Ibid.*, pp. 241, 338-339.

12 Orshansky, *Jews in Russia*, pp. 311-345.

13 On Zweifel and his work see Feiner, “The Turn”; *ibid.*, *The Revolution*.

14 Ben Shlomo, “Scholem,” p. 923.

15 Dan, *Mysticism in Jewish History*, p. 1.

16 Mendes-Flohr, “Orientalism”; Mendes-Flohr and Gries, “Introduction to Buber.”

The contribution of Jewish literature, thought and historical research in Russia to the rehabilitation of mysticism was neglected.¹⁷ Hebrew literature had a central role in transforming the concept of Hassidism and turning it into a legitimate part of Judaism. However, when literary works are mentioned by scholars who deal with this process, they are treated as if they are just documentations from which one can “learn about authentic moods and see pieces of reality.”¹⁸ Scholem wrote that “the deep change in the concept of Judaism following the national revival movement — especially after the First World War — led to a renewed interest in Kabbala as a vital expression of Judaism”;¹⁹ in his memoirs of Buber, Scholem remarked that his and Buber’s main development of interest in Jewish mysticism came with their decision to embrace Zionism after the First World War.²⁰ Israeli scholars accepted the idea that the rise of Zionism motivated the development of a more positive attitude toward Jewish mysticism.²¹

Not all scholars agree that it was Zionism which increased the positive interest of Jews in Jewish mysticism. David Biale wrote that “the discovery of Hassidism [by Buber] was a result of the growing influence of Russian-Jewish intellectuals on Jewish historiography.”²² He argued that the change in Jewish historians’ views of mysticism, which was now considered part of Jewish history, was a result of the meetings between intellectuals from Eastern European and Western European culture in Germany and Switzerland during the first decade of the 20th century. Due to Czarist limitations of places for Jews in universities, which were decreed in the mid-1880s, many Jewish students moved to Germany and Switzerland. Biale wrote that this meeting created “the Romantic revision” of the *Wissenshaft des Judentums*.²³

17 Idel, *New Perspectives*, pp. 19-34; Etkes, “The Scholarship of Hassidism”; Gries, *Book, Writer, Story*, pp. 90, 96, 210; Asaf, “Hasidism in Poland,” p. 354; Margolin, *The Temple of Man*, pp. 3-4.

18 Asaf, “Hasidism in Poland.”

19 Scholem, *Kabbalah*, p. 132.

20 Scholem, *Explications and Implications*, pp. 455-456. In fact, Buber translated Rabbi Nahman of Braslav and was already writing on him in the first decade of the 20th century (the first editions appeared in 1906 and 1908).

21 Verses, *Haskalah and Shabta’ut*, p. 267.

22 Biale, *Gershom Schoelm*, p. 34.

23 On Russian Jewish students in Germany and their contribution to modern Jewish history see also Nathans, *Beyond the Pale*, pp. 201-245.

Mendes-Flohr shed light on the interest in mysticism in *fin de siècle* Germany as part of Orientalist tendencies, which became popular in many European countries. Mysticism was at the time considered to belong to Eastern cultures.²⁴ Moshe Idel raised the possibility that the positive change of attitude to Jewish mysticism in early 20th century Germany occurred under the influence of German philosophical Idealism,²⁵ overlooking the fact that at that time philosophical Idealism was passé in Germany. It was, however, an important part of the spiritual revolution in Russia at the turn of the 20th century, and Russia was seen at the time as an Eastern source of mysticism: German neo-Romanticist mystics, such as the utopist Rudolf Steiner and the poet Rilke, turned to Russia for spiritual inspiration.

The rehabilitation of Jewish mysticism in early 20th century Germany had an earlier, late 19th century Russian stage. This stage, which took place during the 1880s, was Romantic. The second stage took place in the 1890s, and was Neo-romantic. The Romantic movement was part of the crisis of rationalism and positivism in Russia and the rise of *Narodnichestvo*, the populist movement in Russia. It produced the reevaluation of Hassidism as a popular national movement. The second stage appeared together with the rise of Russian neo-mysticism at the turn of the 20th century. Jewish mysticism was at the time regarded as a source of modern Jewish spiritual renaissance. In Russia, where literature was an important cultural and political factor, these changes in the concept of Jewish mysticism and of Judaism itself were wrought by writers, no less than by thinkers and historians. Hebrew literature at that time turned from rewriting the Bible, which for the *masskilim* was the founding text of Judaism, to rewriting *Hassidic* and Kabbalistic texts. This process, which lasted about a quarter of a century in Russia, preceded the major change in the concept of Jewish mysticism, which Buber and Scholem continued.

24 Mendes-Flohr, "Orientalism."

25 Idel, *New Perspectives*, pp. 15-16.

Mysticism in 19th Century Russian Jewish Studies and Literature

The superiority of German 19th century research over Russian is a commonplace.²⁶ It was a commonplace for the Russian *masskilim* themselves as well. Moshe Reines (the son of Rabbi Yitzhak Yaakov Reines of Lithuania) wrote in 1890: “In this field of Jewish studies (...) on which the whole respect for the Jewish nation depends, the contribution of Jewish scholars in Russia is very poor.”²⁷ Here he cited the Jewish-Russian historian Shimon Dubnov, who had in 1888 written: “Very sad reflections rise in our hearts whenever we see books in Jewish studies which are published in Russia. [...] A question rises in our hearts: does such a field exist at all in Jewish writing in Russia? Do we have an original *hokhmat Israel* (Jewish studies)?”²⁸ The reasons of the poor situation of Jewish studies in Russia were attributed by Reines to the economic conditions of the scholars and to the lack of academic posts for Jews in Russia.

In addition to these reasons it is important to regard the difference of approach to culture between Russian and German *masskilim*, against the background of Russian versus German views of culture. Philosophy was at the center of culture in 19th century Germany, whereas in Russia literature and social thinking were central. This difference created two different approaches or schools in Hassidism research: a theological-philological one versus a sociological one.²⁹

For Russian *masskilim*, who were educated by 1860s-1870s positivist Russian thought, the existence of Judaism was not dependent upon theological texts or upon their philosophical meanings. For them Judaism was first of all a practical social reality. When they described Jewish phenomena, they used sociological and moral approaches, sometimes in addition to the philosophical-

26 Schorch, *The Turn to the Past*, p. 211.

27 Reines, *Contemporary Scholars*, p.61.

28 *ibid.*, p. 64.

29 Ettinger, “The Scholarship of Hassidism,” p.212.

theological approach which they inherited from German sources. For them the proof of the existence of Judaism was not to be found in the academic research of ancient texts, but in journalistic and literary activity.

For scholars of Judaism in Germany, however, the importance which was attributed in Russia to contemporaneous Jewish social problems was viewed as a sign of cultural backwardness. They took no interest in contemporaneous German traditional Jewish culture, only in the written Jewish past. This is why it took such a long time to understand how bleak the real situation of German Rabbinic Judaism was.³⁰ In contrast, the research of Judaism in Russia was dedicated mainly to the situation of contemporaneous Jewish society.

The positivistic atmosphere of thought which dominated Russia during the 1860s-1870s created an attitude of suspicion toward the scientific approach to the humanities (in contrast to the sciences of nature and society). It directed the intellectual and scientific efforts of Russians and Jews alike away from the purely academic toward educational and political activities, as well as to journalistic and literary writing.³¹ Journalism and literature, more than academic research, were considered in Russia to be an authentic expression of the national spirit and an important factor in the founding of a nation. The Jewish Russian *maskilim* Avraham Yaakoc Paparno (1840-1919), Uri Kovner (1842-1909) and Reuven Asher Broides (1851-1902) criticized the studies done by Jewish scholars in Germany, which were “loaded with footnotes but empty of live contents (...) Such research can be useful only if the philologist knows how to inspire life into his details and pedantries,” wrote Uri Kovner.³² In a letter to M.Y. Berdychevsky written on October 6, 1888, Dubnov criticized the abstract rationalistic approach of Jewish studies scholars in Germany from a positivist point of view: “One historical fact is better than thousands of [philosophical] reflections.”

Russian *haskalah* writers wrote ideological novels based on their research on Hassidism. Clear examples, although very different in attitude to the movement, are two novels by Josef Perl of Tarnopol, *Megaleh Tmirin* (The Discoverer of Secrets, Vienna 1819, Lviv 1869) and *Sefer Bohan Tsadik* (The *Tsadik's Test*

30 Shohat, *The Turn of a Period*.

31 Verses, *Haskalah Literature*, p. 39.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 167.

Book, Prague 1838); Reuven Asher Broides' novel *Hadat ve-ha-hayim* (Religion and Life, Lemberg [Lviv] 1869-1871); and Micha Yosef Berdychevsky's collection of prose poems *Sefer Hassidim* (The Book of Hassidim, Warsaw 1900). For Russian scholars literature was considered to be an important source of knowledge and an integral part of research itself. The bibliographical list in Semion Dubnov's *Toldot Hahassidut* (A History of Hasidism, 1930-1931) includes, together with academic works of research, novels by Yosef Perl, Yitzhak Erter, Yitzhak Ber Levinzon and Avraham Gottlober, as well as *Teater fun Hassidim* (A Theater of Hassidim), a Yiddish satirical drama.

Disregard of mysticism by Jewish *masskilim* in Germany was natural and understandable: it was not only their rationalistic world view which separated them, but also Hassidism's *Sitz im Leben* (place in life, real life), which was for them distant, alien and inferior. Unlike them, Shlomo Maimon, born in Czarist Lithuania and later one of the founders of the German *haskalah*, happened to meet real life Hassidim, and consequently to draw a more sympathetic picture of its social aspect. As an object of research he found Kabbalah more attractive, however.³³

Hassidism was for Russian *masskilim* a living social phenomenon, which they sometimes knew from their own homes. For them it was the enemy of the *haskalah*. This is why their opposition to Hassidism, even though it was sometimes reasoned by theological arguments as well, was mainly practical and political. Although academic text-based research was not their forte, sources which were not available to the German *masskilim* were open to them. Avraham Gottlober in his book *Toldot haKabbala ve-haHassidut* (History of Kabbalah and Hassidism, Zhitomir 1870) brought a long list of primary and secondary sources, which testifies to considerable effort in reading and research.³⁴ He wrote that he had received information "from the mouths of the *hassidim* themselves, among whom I was born and on the knees of whom I grew up, from their mouths I heard things which I examined and checked, because not all which they say can be believed in."³⁵ That is to say, Gottlober

33 On Maimon's research of Kabbalah manuscript see Idel, *Hassidism*, pp. 79-80, 135-136.

34 Gottlober, *A History of Kabbalah and Hassidism*, p. 9.

35 Ibid.

used methods of research which are in vogue in the academic world today, but were unacceptable in 19th century German universities. Battles between Hassidim, *misnagdim* and *masskilim* had a practical influence on Jewish life in Russia, and these battles were documented by Jewish Russian historians, thinkers and writers. Later on, Buber, Scholem and their students were much less interested in Jewish mysticism as a historical, social and political phenomenon than were scholars who had Russian backgrounds.

In spite of the ideological approach of Russian *masskilim* to Hassidism, the historical and sociological research which was done in Russia is of considerable value. The aforementioned Moissei Berlin's "The History of Hassidism" (1854) includes not only a history of the Hassidic movement since the BESHT (with an emphasis on HABAD), but also an explanation of the mystical theology of Kabbalah and its influence on the mystical ideas of the Sabbateans and the first Hassidim. Yuli Gessen's article "On the history of the religious battle between Jews in Russia during late 18th and early 19th centuries (according to an archive's data)" (1902) describes in detail the shameful *misnagdim*'s denunciations of Hassidim in Vilnius and in other places.³⁶

Orshansky's acquaintance with Hassidism enabled him to find in it not only traces of Kabbalah and Gnosticism (the influence of Gnosticism on Kabbalah was accepted by Jewish scholars in Germany long before Scholem), but also the similarity between Hassidic and Christian Catholic manners of life, as well as the similarity between the Hassidic and *molokans*' beliefs.³⁷ Orshansky nicknamed the Hassidic community "our *Dukhobory* and *Obshchie*,"³⁸ thus hinting at Russian contemporaneous Russian sects such as the *Obshchiny*, another sect which divided itself from the Molokans in the late 19th century and founded collective communities. Orshansky's direction of research was totally neglected by 20th century research of Hassidism. Russian *masskilim* often called

36 Gessen, "On the History of a Religious Battle."

37 Gnosticism was a mystical movement which existed in the Hellenistic period. Molokans were a rationalistic sect in Russia founded in the mid 18th century, which following the Bible rejected some of the Christian principles and accepted some Jewish religious laws. One of their subsects, the Subbotniks (observers of Sabbath) were closest to Judaism.

38 Orshansky, *Jews in Russia*, p. 327. For more on the possible influence of Christian sects on Hassidism in Poland and Lithuania, see Turov, "Hassidism and Christianity."

Jewish mystics *sekta* (Russian: a sect) or *minut* (Hebrew: heresy), having in mind the Russian terms *sekta*, *raskolniki* and *eresy*, which emphasized their non-Orthodox, or even non-Jewish, character.

Jews in Russia: Notes on the Legal and Economic Status of Russian Jews (1872, 1877), the title of Orshansky's pioneer research book on Hassidism,³⁹ speaks for itself about the approach to Jewish research studies in Russia. From the positivistic-moralistic point of view, "*tsadikim*" and "practical Kabbalah" were harshly criticized. From the same point of view the spiritual aspect of Jewish mysticism was seen as engagement with fantasies and superstitions.⁴⁰ This approach did not advance the interest in Kabbalistic and Hassidic texts. Zweifel's defense of Hassidism started from the same *masskili* point of view. He argued that Hassidism moderated the harms of the Kabbalah by rejecting asceticism, magic and false messianism; it also turned Kabbalistic non-monotheistic theology in a humanistic direction; Hassidism also improved the Jewish attitude to women, to cleanliness and to beauty (values for which the Jewish *hasskalah* was fighting).

Together with this positivistic approach, Hassidism was sometimes examined by Russian *masskilim* from a philosophical-theological point of view, and found again to be alien to Judaism. Gottlober, for one, saw traces of *Shi'ite* Islam in Kabbalah.⁴¹ Sometimes the philosophical point of view led Russian *masskilim* to the opposite conclusion (formulated by Shneiur Zaks and Yitzhak Moses), that there is a close connection between the philosophical bases of Kabbalah, Shlomo Ibn Gabirol's poetry, Avraham Ibn Ezra's writings and Spinoza's philosophy, all being equally part of Judaism.⁴²

Hebrew literature in the early and mid-19th century, as long as it was under the influence of German *haskalah*, was mainly engaged in reconstructing the Jewish Biblical past, shedding on it Romantic light. When Russian positivism

39 Orshansky, *Jews in Russia*.

40 Gottlober, *Memoirs*.

41 Gottlober, *A History of Karaites*, p. 53.

42 Shneiur Zaks (1816-1892), a descendent of the Shalah (Yeshayahu Halevi Hrorovitz 1558-1630) and a student of Schelling. His article, which describes Jewish life in Russia, was published in *Israelitische Annalen* (Berlin 1840). Yitzhak Meises in his book *Tsofnat Pa'ane'akh* (1862-1863) described the fantasy world of Kabbalah as congruent with Spinoza's philosophy. See Lahover, "Spinoza," p. 119.

became more influential, Hebrew writers in Russia began dealing with contemporaneous Jewish social problems. The prose writers Yosef Perl (1773-1889) and Yitzhak Erter (1851-1791), both from Galicia (now Ukraine), were personally involved in the hostility between the *masskilim* and the old Jewish world, both rabbinic and Hassidic. The satirical stories and novels which they wrote about the Hassidic way of life, beliefs and style of speech discredited and defamed Hassidism, sharpening the hostility between the camps more than any research could do.

The Romantic Stage

The first writer of Neo-Hassidic literature, in which Yiddish Hassidic stories were transformed into modern literature, was neither Buber (whose German adaptations of Rabbi Nahman's stories appeared in 1906), nor Perets or Berdychevsky (whose neo-Hassidic tales appeared in 1901), but Michael Levy Frumkin-Rudkinson (1845-1904). In his books, *Sefer Sipurei Tsadikim* (The Book of Stories on Hassidic Righteous, Lemberg 1864) and *Toldot Ba'alei Shem Tov* (Biographies of Hassidic Miracle-workers, Königsberg 1876), he collected Hassidic tales, rewrote them in Hebrew, and published them disguised as authentic folklore.⁴³ Rudkinson's work was at first considered by researchers to be authentic Hassidic tales,⁴⁴ but later research made it clear that Rodkinson changed the oral stories by giving them a literary stylization and Masskilic implications.

Literary stylization of oral folklore was characteristic to European Romantic literature. However, Rudkinson's Hassidic stories, with their utilitarian aims and didactic tone, reflect the spirit of the Russian *haskalah*. In spite of Rudkinson's Hassidic origin and education, while he was writing these stories he was already not a *hassid* but a clear *masskil*, as is clear from the rationalistic morals of these stories. However, in spite of the non-Romantic ideological message of these texts, they are the first witnesses of the Russian *Haskalah's* consciousness

43 Rudkinson, *Hassidic Stories*; Nigal, "A Chapter in the History of Hassidic Story?"

44 Dan, *The Hassidic Story*, pp. 189-191, 212.

of the possibility of transforming Hassidic folklore into literary works in the Romantic vein.

The Romantic turn toward Hassidism in Hebrew literature written in Russia had its Russian context. Romantic ideas were dominant in Russian *Narodnichestvo* (the populist movement) during the 1870s, when Russian high culture raised the banners of love for the simple people and a return to the roots of national spirit for the sake of national renaissance. In the 1880s, a reevaluation of Hassidism from a Romantic point of view began to appear among Jewish Russian *masskilim*. Three romantic ideas were at the basis of this positive view of Hassidism: first, that Hassidism was a revolt against the rationalistic formalism of the Talmudic *halakha* and *pilpul* and a battle for the rights of natural feelings; second, Hassidism was a populist movement; third, Hassidism was an authentic expression of the Jewish national soul. This romantic view emphasized the Jewish character of Hassidism, its innovative originality, its emotional “living” character, its ethical-humanistic values and the religious importance attributed by Hassidism to story telling, singing and music.

The Romantic view turned the scholars’ and thinkers’ attention from the social to the spiritual aspect of Kabbalah and Hassidism. In this stage, Jewish mystical spirituality was understood as a folkloric formulation of a social-ethical ideal. According to this view, it was Hassidism which turned Kabbalah into a populist movement, a change which was necessary for religious and national renaissance in a period when rabbinic Judaism was in decline. According to this view, Hassidism supported *Haskalah* by devaluing *halachic* study and pedantic accomplishment of religious laws.⁴⁵ This view enabled Russian *masskilim* to make peace with Hassidism and to reevaluate it.⁴⁶

The move from a positivistic-*masskilic* to a romantic approach to Hassidism is clear in the writings of the historian Semion Dubnov (1860-1941). His first four articles on Jewish mysticism, which were published in the Jewish-Russian monthly *Voskhod* during 1882-1883, were dedicated to Sabbateanism and Frankism, both of which movements were negatively viewed.⁴⁷ During

45 Horodetzky, “The War Between Feeling and Ratio,” p. 541.

46 Verses, “Hassidism from the Haskalah’s Point of View,” p. 379.

47 Dubnov, 4 articles on Sabbataianism and Frankism. Following Dubnov’s articles on Shabetai Zvi a translation into Russian of Graez’ “Remnants of the Sabbataian sekt in Saloninky” was

1888-1893, his series of articles on Hassidism was published in *Voskhod*, and they were later rewritten in his Hebrew book *Toldot Ha-Hassidut* (The History of Hassidism, 1930-1931). The traces of *masskalic* thinking can easily be recognized in Dubnov's first article on Hassidism, where he distinguished between two trends in early Hassidism, "Mystical Stoicism" and "Mystical Epicureanism," in an attempt to anchor early Hassidism in a respected philosophical context.⁴⁸ The Romantic approach to Hassidism appears in Dubnov's criticism of Orshansky for taking interest only in economic factors, neglecting the "spiritual reasons which gave birth to the BESHT's system."⁴⁹ By "spiritual" (*ruhniyut*) Dubnov referred to the emotional needs neglected by the rabbinical establishment which Jewish mysticism filled. In his article "The Appearance of Zaddikism" Dublov cited Shlomo Maimon on the Hassidic ways of life, emphasizing the importance of Hassidism as a reviving force against rabbinical Judaism. While in his first article Dubnov called Hassidism "a blind belief," here Hassidism is presented as a movement whose founders created new moral ideals. Dubnov compared Hassidism to European Christian pietistic movements, which revolted against the dry formalistic religion, raising the flag of "The living truth of the heart," and fighting against the corruption of the religious establishment.⁵⁰

Dubnov's first Hebrew articles appeared in 1894 and 1901,⁵¹ and here he already referred to Hassidism as an "ideal," tested by its social results. In contrast to Orshansky, who was interested only in the sociological and economical aspects of Hassidism, viewing it as external to Judaism, Dubnov treated here Hassidism as a spiritual movement, which had been growing from Judaism's ancient roots.

In his first Hebrew article, "The first Hassidim in Eretz-Israel" (1894), Dubnov described the wave of Hassidic immigration to Palestine at the end of 18th century, which he saw as a continuation of the 15th century Kabbalist colonization of Tsfat. Here he calls Jewish mysticism "Grandfather Israel."⁵²

published in *Voskhod* (June 1884, pp. 153-164), an article which emphasized the non-Jewish character of Sabbataianism and Kabbalah.

48 Holzman, "Dubnov's Correspondence," p. 44.

49 In a letter to Bedychevsky written on June 26 (July 8) 1893. *Ibid.*, p. 47.

50 *Voskhod* (September 1889), pp. 4-5.

51 Dubnov, "The First Hassidim"; *idem*, "Nonconformist Hassidim."

52 Dubnov, "The First Hassidim," p. 201.

Like many other Romantic thinkers, Dubnov did not evaluate the Hassidic neglect of *halachic* law. He criticized this neglect of religious law and the study of Torah, arguing that these were characteristic only of Hassidim who reacted against opposition or suffered from persecutions.⁵³ Although he cited documents which included facts about far-reaching breakings of religious law by the leaders of Hassidism, Dubnov firmly argued that Hassidism “did not mean to uproot practical Judaism or to change the habits of religion in their permanent form as it was fixed by rabbis and the *Shulhan Arukh*. Its main goal was only to correct the internal aspect of this system of beliefs [...] namely, the **emotions** of the believer and the **manner** of the *mitsvot*’s fulfillment, but not to change the religious law itself.”⁵⁴ Dubnov’s article “Hassidim Portsei Gader” (Law-Breaking Hassidim, 1901) expresses his reservations with Berdychevsky’s neo-Romantic approach, which attributed aestheticism and amorality to Hassidism. Following Dubnov, Ahad Ha-am in his essay “Spiritual Renaissance” (1903) praised the Jewish originality and the moral value of Hassidic literature in comparison to that of the *Haskalah*. Dubnov and Ahad Ha-am shared the Romantic approach to Hassidism.

There is no clearer example than Micha Yosef Berdychevsky (1865-1921) for the development of the modern Jewish attitude to Jewish mysticism during the late 19th century. Berdychevsky was born in 1865 in Mezhibozh, the town of Hassidim in the Ukraine, and from age seven to twenty he lived in Dubova, where his father was the town’s Rabbi. He studied two years in the Volozhin *misnagdish yeshiva*, left it, lived in Bershad and Odessa, went to Germany, began to study philosophy in the Breslau university, from there went to Berlin and thence to Bern, where he completed his Ph.D. From 1896 until his death he lived in Berlin.⁵⁵

Berdychevsky is known mainly as a writer, not as a scholar of Hassidism, but if we add together his published articles, his scholarly unpublished manuscript on Hassidism⁵⁶ and his correspondences with Dubnov, Buber and Horodetzky, it will become clear how important he was to the general process

53 Dubnov, “Nonconformist Hassidim.”

54 Ibid., p. 314. Emphasized in the original.

55 On Berdychevsky’s life and work during 1887-1902 see Holzman, *Towards the Tear*.

56 Verses, “An Unpublished Work.”

of changing the modern Jewish attitude to Hassidism during the late 19th century.⁵⁷ As early as 1888, before going to Germany, in his essay “Nahkora” (Let Us Do Research) he called upon people to “do more critical research on the history of Hassidism,” because, “the books which were written by Tzadikim and Hassidim are also flesh of our literature’s flesh.”⁵⁸ In the late 1880s he wrote a research text entitled “Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov, his System, his Time and his Books,” which was not published during his life,⁵⁹ but was of help to Dubnov, Horodetzky and Buber in their research on Hassidism.⁶⁰ His research, on which he worked from the late 1880s until the early 1920s, was part of the rising wave of interest in Hassidism shared by Jewish scholars in both Western and Eastern Europe. It is noteworthy that the majority of these scholars, including Berdychevsky, were not at all Zionists.⁶¹

Radical changes characterize Berdychevsky’s attitude to Hassidism.⁶² In his three essays, “Rabbi Nahman of Braslav” (Ha-Assif, November 1887), “The History of Hassidism” (Ha-Ivri, 13.6.1890) and “Kabbala and Hassidism” (Otsar Ha-Sifrut of the year 1892)⁶³ Berdychevsky took the *masskalic* position. He could not find in Hassidism — in contrast to Kabbalah — a well-organized theological system, especially concerning God and His relationship with the world. Rabbi Nahman, says Berdychevsky, discusses only the relationship between God and man, but his concept of God is formulated “in a most mysterious, concealed language.”⁶⁴ Berdychevsky criticized the obligation which Rabbi Nahman laid upon his Hassidim to confess before him all their secrets. He discussed a young Hassid who refused to confess, arguing that the whole intention of this duty was to dominate the Hassidim and make them

57 Idem., “Berdychevsky’s Hassidism.”

58 Berdychevsky, “Let Us Research,” p. 98.

59 Verses, “An Unpublished Work.”

60 Holzman, Dubnov’s correspondence”; Verses, “An Unpublished Work”; Cutter, “The Buber and Berdychevsky Correspondence”; idem., “Relations Between the Greats.”

61 On Berdychevsky’s attitude to Zionism see Bergman, “Yavneh and Yerusahlayim”; Melnik, “New Voices”; Berdychevsky, “Interview,” p. 69.

62 Verses, “An Unpublished Work”; Mark, “Hassidism and Lawlessness.”

63 Berdychevsky, *complete Works*, vol. 1 pp. 167-179; vol. 2, pp. 198-215.

64 Idem., vol 1. p.171

dependent on the *tsadik*. Where did this custom of confession come from? Berdychevsky asked the question, but did not answer it, because it is as clear to him as to his readers that this is a Christian custom. Berdychevsky found in Rabbi Nahman's teachings a pessimistic world view which contradicted Rabbi Nahman's idealization of joy. "The world is evil then, and we should always be happy and joyful," wrote Berdychevsky with irony.⁶⁵ He saw as especially non-Jewish Nahman's saying that even *Hashem Yitbarach* (God) has a *yetser hara* (the Evil Will). This, said Berdychevsky, "is something alien which the mouth cannot say and the ear cannot stand."⁶⁶ He also criticized Rabbi Nahman's inclination not to be too strict with the fulfillment of religious laws and to emphasize the value of the intention, in contrast to the deed. One could see in Rabbi Nahman a reformer, similar to the *masskilim*, wrote Berdychevsky, but in fact by emphasizing the value of intention he only wanted to make practical life easier for his Hassidim. The persecutions which Rabbi Nahman suffered, he says further, were not a result of his teaching's innovations, but of his personal Messianism and of conflicts between him and other Hassidim.

In "The History of Hassidism," Berdychevsky explained that Hassidism, like the *Haskalah* movement, resulted from the improvement of the economic conditions of Jews in Russia and the Ukraine and from the growing wish of Jews to improve their material standard of life. This wish pushed aside Jewish spiritual activities such as study of the Torah, worship of God, and prayer. "[Now] not the *midrash* is important but the deeds; and what are the deeds? Going to the *tsadikim*, dancing, drinking and becoming joyful."⁶⁷ This Hassidic way was attractive: joy pushed aside Jewish wisdom, Jewish present and Jewish past.

In "Kabbala and Hasidism" Berdychevsky attacked Kabbalah. In a tone of shock ("this is a terrible thing [...] most terrible!") he inveighed against "these pioneers" who had returned back to "the dirt of obscurantism."⁶⁸ Kabbalah, he wrote, is an alien fruit in the vineyard of Judaism. Judaism is a teaching of practical life; it is rational, not tending to miracles and secrets. *Haskalah* is an expression of this Jewish spirit; Kabbalah and philosophy are not. "Kabbala

65 Ibid., p. 175.

66 Ibid.

67 idem., *Complete Works*, vol. 2 p.213

68 ibid., p. 198

is a *takala datit* (religious failure),” wrote Berdychevsky.⁶⁹ It bears a Jewish imprint, but it is very far from Judaism’s real spirit, which is simple and clear. Kabbalah also caused much harm to Judaism: the period of the Kabbalah’s creation was “the blackest period in our history,”⁷⁰ it was a time of backwardness, of false opinions and beliefs. While Judaism is a teaching of life, Kabbalah is a teaching of asceticism which aims at the death of the human spirit; Judaism is monotheistic, while Kabbalah is dualistic; Judaism wishes to remove magic and sorcery, while Kabbalah nourishes them. Neither Kabbalah nor Hassidism contributed to the improvement of the poor material situation of European Jewry or to its spiritual renaissance.

In the mid-1890s, Berdychevsky began to see Hassidism as a Jewish renaissance movement which erased social barriers, opened the gates of spirituality and sacredness, revived the Jewish moral feeling and gave spiritual freedom to the Jewish individual. Berdychevsky’s move toward Romanticism can be discerned in his later essays, “The Individual for the Sake of the Many” (1892), “Hassidic Soul (a View)” (1898) and “Hassidism” (1902).⁷¹ In the first essay he included Kabbalah and Hassidism within “the movements which are inherent to Judaism, making it unique among the nations.” Because they are part of the “nation’s soul” they should also find a literary expression. In this stage, Berdychevsky still treated literature as a means of improving the individual’s ethics. In the second essay he wrote that Hassidism had given “new life” and “new childhood” to the Jew, liberating him from the “*gderot ugzerot digzerot*” (precautions and persecutions) of Jewish Orthodoxy. It widened and purified his horizons.⁷² In the third essay he introduced Hassidism as an expression of religious emotions and yearnings, a return to nature (in contrast to the opinions he expressed in his earlier book), and a revival of religious emotions, populism and cancellation of hierarchies. In Hassidism, wrote Berdychevsky, everybody can suddenly become a prophet, whether a woman, a child or an ignoramus. In the Hassidic worship of God, everything is dominated by the

69 *ibid.*

70 *ibid.*, p. 201.

71 *Ibid.*, vol 3 pp. 48-93.

72 Berdychevsky, *The Book of Hassidim*, pp. 5-20. “Hassidism” was translated into Russian from manuscript and published in *Voskhod*. See Berdychevsky, “Khasidizm.”

personal I. The first Hassidim, like the first Christians, went to the people and were ready to sacrifice themselves for their ideals.

Berdychevsky also expressed his criticism of Hassidism in his early stories, “The Intermission,” “On the Town’s Divisions” and “The Kaddish,” where he described the tension and the aggressive, ugly conflicts between Hassidim and Misnagdim, as well as between different Hassidic groups. The positive change in Berdychevsky’s attitude to Kabbala and Hasidism received its full expression in *The Book of Hasidim* (Warsaw 1899 — the Czarist censorship permission is from January 1897). This is a collection of Hebrew poetical prose fragments which describe the Hassidic world and reconstruct Hassidic stories and sermons, which were originally created in Yiddish. How far was Berdychevsky influenced by Russian turn-of-the-century culture? Berdychevsky did not read Russian,⁷³ and the main body of his writing was created in Germany, but while living in Berlin, he considered himself a Russian Jew⁷⁴ and the reception of his works in Russia was very important to him.⁷⁵ Berdychevsky was conscious of the fact that his readers were living in Russia. In 1900-1901, enthusiastic reviews of his works, including *The Book of Hassidim*, were published in Jewish Russian periodicals.⁷⁶ Like other intellectuals in Germany, Berdychevsky kept track of contemporaneous Russian culture.⁷⁷

The traces of the romantic approach to Hassidism are also clear in the works of the Jewish historians Pesach Mark, Shmuel Aba Horodetzky and Mordechai Ben-Yekhezkel. It is also present in some of Yitzhak Leibush Peretz’s and Yehuda Steinberg’s collections of Hassidic stories, both of which were published at the turn of the 20th century.

73 Govrin, *Lonely in the West*, p. 122.

74 Berdychevsky often used the expressions “In our place Russia” and “We Russian Jews.” See *Complete Works* vol. 1 p. 208; vol. 3, p. 208. See also his diary in Holzman, *Ginzei* 6, pp. 84-85.

75 His stories were translated into Russian by his wife Rachel, and were published first in the *Kni-zhki Voskhoda* (Sept 1900; January 1903) then as a book (Berlin 1922). On his contacts with Akim Volynsky, the Jewish editor of *Severny Vestnik*, see Holzman, *Ginzei* 5, p. 139. Berdychevsky also arranged for a Russian translation of his essay on Hassidism, originally in German, which remained unpublished. See Berdychevsky, *Khassidizm*.

76 Shwarz, “The Book of Hassidim”; Melnik, “New Voices”; Erenpreis, “Two Representatives.”

77 An example for that is the fact that in 1903 his friend Yosef Melnik wrote to him that he was writing an essay on “The Importance of Vladymir Soloviev in Russian Philosophy” for the Viennese periodical *Die Gnosis*, not explaining who Soloviev was. The letter is in Berdychevsky’s archive in Holon.

The Neo-Romantic Stage

The neo-Romantic approach to Jewish mysticism, which followed the Romantic one during the 1890s, focused on Hassidic and Kabbalistic texts as mystical, esoteric, ecstatic literature of high spiritual meaning, which could be understood only by the chosen few. The scholars who were writing about mysticism at this stage were neither philosophical, sociological nor moral, but mystical: they tended to adopt a mystical visionary style themselves. Modern Jewish thinkers and writers began to describe Hassidic and Kabbalistic experiences as belonging not to their fathers and forefathers, but to their own personal experiences. The Hassidic and Kabbalistic texts themselves, rather than the ways of life they espoused, now became a center of positive interest. Following this change, a series of “neo-Hassidic” texts was published. They were based on Hassidic stories and sermons and stylized in the vein of Symbolist literature, which at that time was flourishing in Europe.

According to the neo-Romantic view, Jewish mysticism was not part of Jewish folklore, but was a collection of Symbolist literary chef d’oeuvres expressing spiritual and aesthetic experiences which only the few are capable of writing about. Their exposure and literary revival would, it was felt, motivate contemporaneous Jewish revival. It was a revolutionary path to redemption, which great writers of rare talent have prepared by their use of the Kabbalistic system of symbols and by symbolic Hassidic stories. Against the background of literary Symbolism, psychoanalysis and philosophical Vitalism, Jewish mystical experiences were now discussed as bursting from unconscious, non-ethical, dangerous but vital drives, which activate the Jewish collective soul and are expressed by the chosen prophets-artists. From the historical point of view, Kabbalah, Sabbateanism, Frankism and Hassidism were now viewed as expressions of creative, daring and dangerous Jewish vitality, which saved Judaism from even more dangerous degeneration processes. Jewish mysticism was also presented as promoting redemption through liberation from sexual inhibitions, with an emphasis on the erotic aspect of mystical traditions.⁷⁸

78 Rubin, “Kidushin.”

The image of Jewish mysticism was, then, changing over the course of the 1890s. Now Kabbalah and Hassidism, and even Sabbateanism, Frankism and Karaism, were no longer conceived as simple populist movements. They were found to be ecstatic spiritual experiences, which only the few, especially those with artists' souls, could have.

The resemblances between Jewish and Christian mysticisms were now understood not as a Jewish fault, but as a merit. In contrast to the Romantic emphasis on the Jewish originality of Hassidism, at this stage the founders of Hassidism were often compared to the founders of Christianity by their ways of life, experiences and personality patterns.

Hillel Zeitlin (1871-1942) is a clear representative of this approach. Born in Belorussia, he was a descendent of both Rabbinical (from his father's side) and Hassidic (from his mother's side) dynasties. In 1897 he moved to Gomel (Homel, Ukraine), where he became the spiritual leader of a group of young Jewish intellectuals, including Yosef Hayim Brenner and Uri Nissan Gnessin, who both went on to become famous Hebrew prose writers. Zeitlin was erudite in Western philosophy as well as in Kabbalah and Hassidism. In 1905 he published a series of articles on Nietzsche, and in 1910 his books on Hassidism, on the BESHT and on Rabbi Nahman of Braslav appeared. In Rabbi Nahman's writings Zeitlin found similarities to the ideas of Schopenhauer (in the same way as Berdychevsky in his *Book of Hassidim* found similarities between the BESHT's and Schopenhauer's ideas). For Zeitlin both Schopenhauer and Rabbi Nahman of Braslav expressed an opposition to the positivism of August Comte, thus preceding the contemporaneous idealistic trends in German and Russian thought.⁷⁹

In his essay "The Good and the Evil According to Jewish and Non-Jewish Sages," published in the Hebrew monthly *Ha-Shiloach* in 1900, Zeitlin wrote: "The sayings of the Hassidim are full of exalted poetry, of sacred feelings, of strong yearnings to be set free from this low and ugly world to the world of goodness, justice and sacredness."⁸⁰ In another essay (1903), Zeitlin answered those who rejected mysticism because it deals with abstract fantasies and vague value. He argued that in contrast to the "inferior view," according to which

79 Zeitlin, *Nahman of Braslav*, pp. 19-20.

80 Zeitlin, "The Good and the Evil," p. 504.

only the concrete world exists, Hassidism is a “superior wisdom”; it can see the divine powers which lie in everything, revive everything and give existence to everything. Hassidism enables us to view the terrestrial world as nothing.⁸¹

Micha Yosef Berdychevsky, again, played a major role in this passage of Jewish thought to the neo-Romanticist concept of Hassidism, both as a writer and as an essayist and scholar. Berdychevsky was the first writer who focused on the Hassidic spiritual experience. He defined it with a cluster of three components: enthusiasm, unity and sacredness.⁸² The Hassidic unity, according to Berdychevsky, is not a unity of the Hassid with God, but between the Hassid and other human beings. According to his definition, moral value and philosophic truth are meaningless in the context of Hassidic experience. In this experience “there is neither thought nor knowledge.” It is not a revelation of religious truth. Sacredness enables man not to achieve the divine world, but to know himself, to reach the mystery of his own authentic self, and thus to purify himself of all which is external to his pure self. In contrast to Buddhist nirvana, the Hassidic ecstasy or *hitlahavut* (enthusiasm) is a growing inner storm. It contains a revolutionary element, which is the secret of vitality.

In 1888 Dubnov already defined Hassidim as “religious *Raskol'niki* (dissenters) of mystical agenda.”⁸³ This terminology, in contrast to the former “sect,” moderates the moral criticism by emphasizing the mystical aspect of Hassidism. Here Dubnov hinted at the resemblance between Hassidism and Russian movements, which at that time were winning rehabilitation in Russian literature and theological thought.

The legitimization of Jewish mysticism in historical research was congruent with the change in the connotation of the word *kat* (sect), which earlier pejoratively defined Kabbalah and Hassidism. Now this word appeared as the common, respectful name of the Pharisees, Karaites, Kabbalists, Hassidim, and the early Christians. The Karaites attracted scholarly attention following the research of Avraham Eliahu Harkavi (1835-1919), the only scholar in Russia who could equal the *Wissenshaft des Judentums*' scholars in Germany. His

81 Idem., “Observation of the World,” p. 213.

82 Berdychevsky, *The Book of Hassidim*, pp. 14-15.

83 *Voskhod* (Jan 1888), p. 83.

research on the Karaites and the Kuzarites was published beginning in 1874, and contributed to the positive change in attitude towards Jewish “sects.” Harkavi’s book *Lekorot Hakatot Be-Israel* (On the History of Jewish Sects, Warsaw 1895), which deals with the Karaites, openly rehabilitated Jewish sects. This approach opened the way to research on the various Jewish streams during the Hellenistic period and, in fact, marked a new concept of Judaism, different from the one which was constructed by the German *masskilim*.

The concept of Judaism not in sociological and economic terms but in terms of mystical spirituality appeared simultaneously with a pessimistic concept of the contemporaneous Jewish situation. This view was, in the vein of European Decadence’s historical thinking, according to which history is a deterministic process which inevitably ends with the degeneration and death of nations. Dubnov described the history of Jewish mysticism as a process of gradual decadence, beginning from the “healthy teachings of the BESHT and gradually leading to corruption and degeneration.”⁸⁴ Dubnov wrote: “The law of Progress, which dominates other fields of life, does not dominate this special field [of religious life].”⁸⁵ Dubnov defined his contemporaneous Hassidism as a stage of degeneration in the ancient chain of Jewish mysticism, which began with the “theoretical” stage of Spanish 13th century Kabbalah and continued with the “practical” stage of 16th century Kabbalah in Tsfat and then the appearance of Hassidism in 18th century Poland and a hundred years of Hassidic decadence.⁸⁶ This view of the history of Jewish mysticism, which Scholem inherited from Dubnov, made it easy to admire Kabbalah and early Hassidism, but equally easy to disrespect contemporary populist Hassidism, and declare that it was “dying.”

Hillel Zeitlin in his aforementioned essay, “The Good and the Evil According to Jewish and World Sages,” argued that existential pessimism (in Schopenhauer’s vein) should be the basis for the understanding of mysticism in general, and Jewish mysticism in particular. He argued that the mystical world view is engaged in trying to solve the problem of Evil. Jewish mysticism,

84 Dubnov, *ibid*.

85 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

86 *Ibid.*, p. 86.

according to Zeitlin, is a dualistic theology which is meant to explain the inevitable presence of Evil in life by attributing it to “particular powers [...], not to the Almighty God Himself.”⁸⁷

While Hassidism was the focus of interest for Russian *masskilim* in the Romantic era, at this point Kabbalah attracted their attention. In the 1870s, Russian-born Jewish scholars who studied in Germany were already writing about the Kabbalah. Salomon Rubin, who was born in Galicia and grew up in Ukraine, dedicated three books to the topic (1874, 1888, 1893).⁸⁸ In 1887 Avraham Epshtein, who was born in Ukraine and moved to Vienna in his youth, wrote an article on *The Book of Creation*, which opens with the words “*The Book of Creation* is a precious treasure which was left for us from ancient times.”⁸⁹ Epshtein discussed the mystical concept of language in *The Book of Creation* and attracted attention to the similarity between this concept and “contemporaneous concepts of language” — perhaps having in mind the ideas of Potebnja in his *Language and Thought* (1862), which later were developed by the Russian symbolists. Shimon Bernfeld in his essay “Philosophy and Kabbala: a Historical picture” (1899) also stressed the Jewish character of Kabbalah.⁹⁰ Hillel Zeitlin’s and Azriel Gunzig’s articles, published in 1898-1900,⁹¹ present it as a respectable mystical system of thought, similar to non-Jewish mysticisms.

In 1896 David Gintsburg’s essay “Kabbalah: the Mystical Philosophy of the Jews” was published in the leading Russian periodical *Voprosy Filosofii i psikhologii* (Philosophical and Psychological Problems), with an introduction and notes by Vladimir Soloviev.⁹² This article canonized Jewish mysticism in the intellectual Russian context and encouraged the interest of Russian intellectuals and writers in Judaism.

87 Zeitlin, “The Good and the Evil.”

88 Shlomo Rubin, *Sod Ha-Sefirot* (The Secret of the Sefirot, Wiena 1874); *Razei hasfirot ve-rimzei ha-misparim be-hegion ha-khakirot uve-dimyon ha-mistarom etsel kol ha-amim* (The secrets of Sefirot and the hints of numbers in all the nations); *Heidentum und Kabbalah* (Paganism and Kabbal, Wien 1892).

89 Epshtein, “From the Ancient History fo the Jews,” pp. 40-49.

90 Bernfeld, “Philosophy and kabala.”

91 Günzig, “Legend and kabala”; Zeitlin, “The Good and the Evil,” pp. 498-505.

92 Gintsburg, “Kabbalah.”

The growing interest of Jewish intellectuals in Judaism as part of world mysticism at the turn of the 20th century becomes evident when we look at the contents list of contemporaneous Hebrew periodicals. In *Hashiloah* vol. * (1899) we find David Kahana's comprehensive research "On Hassidism"; Hillel Zeitlin's long essay on Hassidism; Simon Bernfeld's essay "Philosophy and Kabbala"; and Shalom Harif's note "On the History of Hassidism." In *Ha-Eshkol* vol. * (1900) we find the editor Azriel Gunzig's "The Indian [sic] Philosophy and Kabbala"; Shlomo Rubin's "*Massekhet Kidushin Be'olam Ha-atsilut*" (Eros in the Divine Sefirot), dedicated to love and sex in Jewish and non-Jewish mysticism; Horodetzky's essay on Rabbi Mordechai Yoffe; "Hassidut," a series of literary semi-Hassidic texts written by Berdychevsky; and the ballad "Rabbi Yosef de la Reina" by Yehezkel Levit. Together with Western-like research of Jewish mysticism, biographies of leading Hassidim, parts of which are partly hagiographical, can also be found in Hebrew Eastern European journalism in the last decade of the 19th century.⁹³

Another testimony to the Russian *masskilim*'s growing interest in mysticism at the turn of the 20th century is the number of pages dedicated to the items "kabbala" (28 columns) and "Apocalypse" (44 columns) in the Brokgaus and Efron *Evreiskaia (Jewish) Encyclopedia* of 1907-1913. Modern Jewish writers and Rabbis published their own visionary mystical texts (as Martin Buber did later). Such is Shmuel Alexandrov's philosophical-mystical book *The Meaning of the Creation* (1899)⁹⁴ and Hillel Zeitlin's visionary poetic prose, which was published from the mid-1900s (initially in Yiddish), together with his articles on Hassidism.⁹⁵

Yosef Hayyim Brenner's posthumous article in Yiddish, probably written in 1906, summarizes the new view of Jewish mysticism in a clear neo-Romanticist tone. Brenner first openly attacked the *masskalic* rejection of Hassidism, and declared that for "us, for whom Judaism is a living body (...) what is important in Hassidism is the light with which it filled the Jewish soul (...) its enthusiasm

93 Rabinovich, "The Shneurson's" (and see Berdychevsky's harsh criticism of Rabinovich in *Complete Works* vol. 2, pp. 163-176; Kharif, "On the History of Hassidism"; Epshtein, "Rabi Moshe Hagoleh of Kiev"; Horodetzky, "HaRASHAL and kabala"; idem, *History of Hassidism* .

94 Alexandrov, "The Meaning of the Creation."

95 Zeitlin, *Yiddish Works*; idem, *The BESHT*; idem, *Nahman of Braslav*; idem, *Trends in Hassidism*.

and ecstasy, its idealism (...) its poetry.”⁹⁶ Brenner emphasized the ascetic tendencies of Hassidism, comparing it to the Russian Christian neo-mystical “God seekers.” In accordance with the revolutionary *Zeitgeist*, Judaism was compared here to a living body in which many different “streams” are flowing, gushing and bubbling. By being absorbed into the “Jewish body” these non-conformist streams revitalize Judaism. In 1908 Brenner wrote that “the souls of the BESHT and similar Hassidim are closer to us than Lilienblum etc. [the positivistic *masskilim*]; The BESHT’s inner life, his penetration to the secrets of life, of the world, existence, beauty, light — all this is closer to the soul of the modern Jew than the souls of the *masskilim*.”⁹⁷

Characteristic to the neo-Romantic view was the emphasis on the ascetic elements in Hassidism, paradoxically contributing to revival. In his *Book of Hassidim* Berdychevsky laid great stress on Hassidic “*bitul ha-yesh*” (negation of the existence of terrestrial reality) and self-annihilation, identifying it with Schopenhauer’s ideas and Nietzsche’s “Beyond Good and Evil.” In this context Berdychevsky also compared the founders of Hassidism with Jesus and his apostles.

The essay “On Hassidim and *Tsadikim*,” which is included in Berdychevsky’s collection of essays *Über Chassidim und Zaddikim: Vom östlichen Judentum* (On Hassidim and Tsadikim: From Eastern Judaism, 1918), opens with the words “Hassidism is a mystical stream of Judaism.”⁹⁸ Berdychevsky stressed the inheritance and the continuity of these streams in Judaism. Hassidism is introduced here as a version of Kabbalah. The philosophy of Jewish mysticism is built, according to Berdychevsky, upon “the ancient Will, the ancient Evil and the inevitability of Existence.” He attributed to Jewish mysticism a philosophy which negates free will by mythologizing Evil. In explaining Jewish mysticism to the German reader he used Schopenhaurian and Nietzschean terminology.

Berdychevsky’s emphasis on the Hassidic rejection of conventional moral behavior (which Scholem later attributed to Kabbalah) was not accepted by Jewish writers and thinkers in Russia. Mordechai Zeev Feierberg (1874-1899)

96 Brenner, *Writings in Yiddish*, pp. 208-211.

97 Brenner, *Complete Works*, vol. 3 pp. 220-221.

98 Berdychevsky, *On Chassidim and Zaddikim*, p. 40.

in his long story “Where?” (1897) described Hassidic experience as a yearning for the improvement of this world, and in his essays he attacked Berdychevsky’s Nietzschean concept of Judaism.⁹⁹ Hillel Zeitlin also rejected Berdychevsky’s view that Hassidism canceled the difference between good and evil.¹⁰⁰ Zeitlin, like Berdychevsky, described the Hassidic mystical experience in aesthetic terms, but he did not see it as a contrast to Hassidic ethics. He understood Hassidic ethics as a move from universal to personal ethics. Zeitlin wrote that mysticism leads to fulfillment of moral ideas out of obedience to moral concepts which lie deep in human nature, not out of external motivations.¹⁰¹ Brenner also presented Jewish *torat hanistar* (mysticism) as a liberation from *mitzvot* (religious laws), but not from their internal moral feelings.¹⁰²

The neo-Romantic stage brought forth the understanding of Jewish mysticism as Eastern or Oriental, as it was accepted in Germany: the East included the Far East (India and Persia), the Semitic peoples (Jews and Arabs) and Eastern Europe (Russia).¹⁰³ Therefore not only Paris but also Moscow and St. Petersburg became centers and pilgrimage goals for European writers, artists and intellectuals who were trying to learn Russian literature and thought. This move signified both a return to the ancient Semitic sources of Judaism and a rejection of Western — especially German — culture as a model for modern Judaism. For Russian Jews who were studying in Germany, or for those whose parents were born in Czarist Russia, German orientalism was a signal of return to their Jewish roots, now understood as mystical. An attractive mixture of orientalism, mysticism and anarchist messianism was found in the Jewish false Messiah Sabbetai Zvi, who became popular in Jewish literature at the beginning of the 20th century.

Literary and scholarly writing about Hassidism was now attacking the Western point of view. Shneieur Zalman Schechter — born to a Hassidic family in Rumania, graduate of the Berlin High Institute for Jewish Studies and the Berlin University and beginning in 1890 a teacher at Cambridge

99 Feierberg, *Complete Works*, pp. 154-159.

100 Zeitlin, “Observation of the World” 13 pp. 208-218.

101 Ibid 11, pp. 208-218.

102 Brenner *Writings in Yiddish*, pp. 212-213.

103 Mendes-Flohr, “Orientalism.”

University — wrote in 1887: “The historians who dealt with Hassidism were, almost with no exception, absorbed with Western culture and rationalism (...) for them Hassidism was a movement which should be rejected because it was not aesthetic and not rational.”¹⁰⁴ Two years later AZAR (Alexander Ziskind Rabinovich) in his essay “The History of the Shneurson Family” defended HABAD while attacking “the Berlin Haskalah.” He even explained that the founders of HABAD, who managed to bring their students into the garden of Kabbalah but also safely out of it, used Kabbalah as an “antidote against the poison which the Berlin Haskalah secreted.”¹⁰⁵ Hillel Zeitlin in his aforementioned “The Good and the Evil According to Jewish and World Sages” analyzed Western and Eastern philosophical views and came to the conclusion that the problem of Evil received Jewish answers “in which the spirit of Eastern mysticism sparkles.”¹⁰⁶

In the constant cultural war between Easterners and Westerners in Russia during the 19th century, Jews always took the Western side. However, at the turn of the 20th century, new voices were rising, criticizing Western ideas — especially Nietzscheanism — from a moral and mystical point of view, in the vein of Dostoevsky’s and Soloviev’s criticisms of the West. Such views were expressed by Hillel Zeitlin and Shmuel Alexandrov in their criticism of Berdychevsky.

Zionists understood orientalism as a rejection of Jewish existence in Europe and a call to return to the Jewish Eastern sources in Eretz-Israel. Mordechai Zeev Feierberg in his stories joined Ahad Ha-Am, who in his essays struggled for the return of Judaism from the West to the East. Eretz-Israel was just a part of this vision. Feierberg’s hero of the influential story “Where?” (1899) ends his final monologue with the words: “If it is true that the Jewish people has a mission, let him create his teaching and carry it to the East (...) not only to “Eretz-Israel,” but also to the East as a whole (...) to the East! To the East!”¹⁰⁷

104 Schechter, *The Chassidim*.

105 Rabinovich, “History,” p. 164.

106 Zeitlin, “the Good and the Evil,” p. 498.

107 Feierberg, *Complete Works*, p. 125. In 1900 the story was translated into Russian and published in *Voskhod*. See Feierberg, Kuda.

This orientalist view of Judaism was shared by Berdychevsky, the declared opponent of Ahad Ha-am. His enthusiasm for Hassidism, which he knew from his Eastern European youth, was a result of his disappointment upon meeting with Western culture in Germany. In his autobiographical essay “To Be or to Cease: Fragments” (1894) he explained the difference between himself and his father thus: “my father had strong yearnings for the Eastern land (...) while I was totally engaged with the West.” This was his mistake, which he was trying to correct by returning to his father’s world — both to Judaism and to Eastern European Jewish culture. The title Berdychevsky gave to his German collection of essays on Judaism was *Über Chassidim und Zaddikim: Vom östlichen Judentum* (On Hassidim and Tsadikim: from Eastern Judaism, 1918). The attraction to mysticism on the part of Jewish writers who lived in Germany at the beginning of the 20th century was connected with their growing interest in their “Eastern” — Semitic and East-European — roots, an interest which was common to Jewish and German high culture at that time. Berdychevsky is not the only example. For Franz Kafka, seeing his friend, the Hebrew poet Mordechai Gerogo Langer (1894-1943), who was born to an assimilated family in Prague, turn into a Belzian (Polish) Hassid, was a milestone on the way to finding his own Jewish identity.

The neo-Romantic view of Hassidism was often expressed in Symbolist style. This was clear to Berdychevsky’s Jewish readers in Russia, where Nietzscheanism and Symbolism were mixed together at the turn of the 20th century. One of Berdychevsky’s critics wrote in the *Voskhod* (1900): “In all the writings of Berdychevsky there is a tendency to symbolism, but in *Sefer Hassidim* he is already a full-fledged symbolist.”¹⁰⁸ Later in this review the critic argued that Berdychevsky admired “the moral beauty” of Hassidism because he had found in it Nietzschean idealization of the *Übermensch* and his idea of “beyond Good and Evil.” This impression is solidly based on the text, especially on the two final essays, “A Transgression for its Own Sake” and “Good and Evil.”

Berdychevsky admired Hassidism not because he was a Zionist — he was not — but because he felt the need to return to Jewish Eastern European culture,

108 Shvarts, “The book of Hassidim.”

which he reevaluated as the “second Babylon.”¹⁰⁹ While living in Berlin he constantly followed Russian journals and periodicals and corresponded with Jews who lived in Russia. One of them was Eliezer Zvi Hacoheh Zweifel, the writer of *Shalom al Israel* (1868-1873), the pioneer *masskalic* book which shed positive light on Hassidism. During 1888-1900 Berdychesky also corresponded with Rabbi Shmuel Alexandrov, who was an admirer of Vladimir Soloviev.¹¹⁰ As mentioned above, Berdychevsky could not read Russian, but he could know Soloviev’s work from a German translation which was published in the late 1880s. He also had friends who were familiar with Soloviev’s writings.¹¹¹

Neo-Hassidic Hebrew Literature

The decade which preceded Buber’s publication of Rabbi Nahman’s stories in 1906 was replete with neo-Hassidic literary activity.¹¹² The majority of the creators of this literary genre tried to turn Hassidic stories into a modern literature by re-writing them as poetic Symbolist prose fiction. The idea of rewriting ancient religious texts was not new, of course: *Haskalah* literature did the same with the Bible. But there was a great difference between the rewriting of the Bible and of mystical texts: none of the *Haskalah* writers who used Biblical style intended to become the creators of a new Bible, inheritors to the writer(s) of the Bible, possessing his/their authority. The majority of the neo-Hassidic literature writers, however, considered themselves to be modern Hassidic *tsadikim* who would, like the BESHT and Rabbi Nahman,

109 Berdychevsky, “On Eastern Judaism,” p.118 [In Hebrew Translation]

110 On Shmuel Alexandrov see Slutski, “Alexandrov”; Greenboim, “Rabbis in SSSR.” Berdychevsky also published one of Alexandrov’s essays and wrote a review on it in the periodical *Beit Hamidrah* which he edited. He also wrote a review of Alexandrov’s “Masekhet Negaim.” See Bersychevsky, *Complete Works* vol. 1 pp. 222-224. Alexandrov was critical of Berdychevsky’s Nietzschean. See Alexandrov, “The time of Torah.”

111 Berdychevsky’s friend, Yosef Mel’nik, wrote an essay on Soloviev which was published in *Gnosis*; Semion Dubnov polemicized with Soloviev in his *Letters on Old and New Judaism*, pp. 62-68; Hillel Zeitlin wrote on Soloviev with admiration. See Zeitlin, *Selected Writings* vol. 2 p. 124; Alexandrov mentions Soloviev in his letters to Rabbi Kook. See Alexandrov, *Letters of Research and Criticism*, vol. 2 pp. 7-8.

112 Ross, *Beloved and Hated Tradition*.

create modern mysticism and have a modern Jewish spiritual mission. They considered themselves to be modern prophets in the Nietzschean sense of the word. Polemicalizing with Berdychevsky, Feierberg called him “*meshorer u-va'al sod*” (a poet and a mystic).¹¹³ These writers paved the way to Buber’s writings of semi-Hassidic texts.¹¹⁴

The first Hebrew writers who, in the last decade of the 19th century, described mystical experiences in their writings were Yitzhak Leibush Perets, Micha Yosef Berdychevsky and Mordechai Zeev Feierberg. Peretz grew up in Zamoshch (Poland), in a non-Hassidic environment. As a young man he studied in a *yeshiva* near Zamoshch, and later became a supporter of Socialism. He met Hassidim only in 1890, when he visited south-east Poland. After visiting the Hassidic Rabbi of Biale he wrote about him in an unflattering tone. He learned about Hassidism from the writings of Rabbi Nahman of Braslav.¹¹⁵ Berdychevsky grew up in a Hassidic family, knew from within the Hassidic way of life and read Hassidic writings. As a young man he was attracted to HABAD, but this caused a severe clash with his father-in-law, and was one of the reasons for his forced divorce.¹¹⁶ In 1900, both writers published their collections of neo-Hassidic short stories, Peretz’s *Hassidism* and Berdychevsky’s *The Book of Hassidim*, thus marking the positive turn toward Hassidism in Hebrew literature.

Y.L. Peretz did not belong to the “prophetic” majority. He turned to neo-Hassidic writing not because he was enthusiastic about Hassidic ideas or ways of life, but for sheer literary reasons. His first neo-Hassidic poetic prose text, “The Hassidic Soul” was published in *Ha-Hetz* which he published (Warsaw 1894), together with his literary manifesto, calling to Hebrew writers in Russia and Poland to wean themselves from realistic writing and turn to contemporaneous literary Symbolism.¹¹⁷ Peretz himself wrote in this Symbolist poetic prose style during the 1890s, composing neo-Hassidic and other literary texts

113 Feierberg, *Complete Works*, p. 185.

114 *Ibid.*, 177-179.

115 Frieden, “Parody and Hagegraphy.”

116 Feinberg, “Berdychevsky Before.”

117 Peretz, *The Arrow*, p. 15.

in Hebrew and in Yiddish which he later included in the section “Fables and Fantasies.”¹¹⁸ Peretz’ poetic prose greatly moved Berdychevsky and motivated him to write similar texts, which he collected in his *The Book of Hassidim* (1899). In 1901 Berdychevsky wrote an enthusiastic review of Peretz’ collection of short stories *Hassidut* (Warsaw 1901). Among other compliments, he wrote: “For such poetry I have prayed a long time, my soul was dying for it — and here it stands before us with its full glory and height, with its purity of voice, with its full existence and reality.”¹¹⁹

Peretz’ and Berdychevsky’s Symbolist neo-Hassidic prose was being published in various periodicals during the late 1890s, when Symbolism in Russia and Poland became dominant in literature. Like Berdychevsky, and even more so, Peretz did not turn to Hassidism because he was a Zionist, but because he was trying to find a new style for writing modern Jewish literature. Since he was not born to a Hassidic family, and his contacts with the Hassidic story did not result from nostalgia and childhood memories, for him Hassidic stories were a means to write literature which could be both originally Jewish and modern European. Thus it could cure the modern Jewish “rent in the heart” (Berdychevsky’s expression), namely, the conflict between Judaism and modernism in the heart of the new Jew. Berdychevsky’s neo-Hassidic texts are closer than Peretz’s to the authentic Hassidic style. Berdychevsky tried to imitate the style of *The Praises of the BESHT* and *The Tania*, sometimes citing from Hassidic sources. However, he, like Peretz, used Hassidic style in order to preach modern ideas, in this case the ideas of Schopenhauer, which at that time were very close to his heart.

David Jacobson wrote, “Neo-Hassidism includes essays, stories, rewritten Hassidic stories, anthologies and historical scholarly works in which writers turned to Hassidism as a source for values which could become a casus to meeting with the cultural needs of their time.”¹²⁰ Comparing Peretz’ and Berdychevsky’s neo-Hassidic writings, Jacobson came to the conclusion that

118 Peretz, *Complete Works in Hebrew* vol. 5 part a. The earliest text here is “Venus and Sulamith” (pp. 103-111), which was first published in 1889 in Yiddish. See Peretz, *Complete Works in Yiddish*, pp.10-16.

119 Berdychevsky, “Divrei Zemer.”

120 Jacobson, *Modern Midrash*, p. 19.

Berdychevsky saw in Hassidism a source of cultural Jewish revival, while for Peretz it was a source of an aesthetic vision which would lead Hebrew and Yiddish literature of his time in the direction he was looking for.¹²¹

Feierberg described the Hassidic way of life and included a Hassidic tale in his story "In the Evening" (1898). Feierberg saw continuity between the Hassidic battle for the revitalization of Jewish spirituality and Ahad Ha-am's battle for Spiritual Zionism. In contrast to Berdychevsky, Feierberg argued that the study of the Talmud was an indivisible part of the unique Jewish mystical experience. He illustrated this idea in his story "The Shadows" (1899), which opens with a monologue describing studying in yeshiva as a mystical experience. The same idea repeats in Bialik's long poem "Hamatmid" (The Diligent Yeshiva Student, 1898).

Bialik won the title of "Jewish national poet," because his readers found his poetry to be the expression of the contemporary Jewish soul. Bialik's poetry had an enormous influence on 20th century Hebrew literature. In his earliest poems, written in the early 1890s, he was still rewriting the Bible, but beginning in 1898, in his poem "*Tikun Hatsot*" (Midnight Prayer), he began using mystical sources. This move became clear in his poems "*Mishomrim Laboker*" (From Morning Guards, 1899), "*Lamitnadvim Ba-Am*" (To the People's Volunteers, 1900), "*Zohar*" (Splendor, 1901) and "*Levadi*" (Alone, 1902), and reached its climax in "*Hetsits Va-Met*" (Peeped and Died, 1916). Bialik uncovered the theoretical basis of this change in his essays "*Gilui Ve-Khisui Ba-Lashon*" (Uncovering and Covering by Language, 1915) and "*Halakha and Agada*" (1918),¹²² which in 1920 was translated into German by the young Gerhardt (Gershon) Scholem.¹²³ During 1903-1905, Bialik was writing a series of poems and long poems in the center of which we find a feminine divine redemptive image. Bialik did not grow up in a Hassidic home, and in his youth he studied in the anti-Hassidic Volozhin *yeshiva*.

In 1906, the publication date of Buber's first neo-Hassidic literary work, Brenner could already summarize the short history of Hassidism in modern

121 Ibid., p. 20.

122 Elio, "Covering and Uncovering"

123 See Schoelm, "Halacha and Aggada."

Hebrew literature. He wrote that Hassidism was a focus of interest to Hebrew writers already in the 19th century, but those writers were rightly mocking “the Hassidic nonsense.” They, however, saw only the “peel,” the external follies, while “the poets of Hassidism in Jewish contemporary literature such as Berdychevsky, Peretz and Zeitlin, as well as Yehuda Shteinberg and Sholem Ash, uncovered Hassidism’s roots of the soul,” its inner essence.¹²⁴

Hebrew literature in Eretz-Israel, even in the context of Socialist Zionism, inherited this positive attitude to Hassidism. Yitzhak Lamdan and Avraham Shlonsky accepted as self-evident the seemingly paradoxical mixture of Jewish pioneer revolution, on the one hand, and Hassidism, on the other hand. Lamdan’s long poem “Massada” (1927) was considered to be “the Bible of the third *aliya*.”¹²⁵ Lamdan volunteered to join the Red Army out of belief in the Russian Revolution, but at the same time considering the Magid of Dubno his spiritual father and Rabbi Avraham Yehuda Pollak “a Ukrainian version of A.D. Gordon.”¹²⁶ Lamdan wrote in his diary:

We must purify the soul and put some sort of sacredness in it. We must fight *tum'ah* (religious impurity) by the strength of purity and sacredness (...) Who are we and what are our life as Jews and as people? Right away the sparkle in your soul will kindle and become a flame, your soul will burst out for redemption (...) but we are in chains! (...) For not all is everyday vulgarity, there is some sacredness, some sacred sparks, and we should find it in the piles of dirt which have consolidated upon the poor earth (...) I would like to purify myself and become sacred.¹²⁷

This text bears witness to Lamdan’s serious contact with traditional Jewish mysticism. In “Massada” he described the life of Zionist pioneers in Eretz-Israel as a continuation of the Jewish mystical chain. One paragraph in this poem, which begins with the words “*Lo nutka od hashalsholet*” (The chain has not yet been broken) became a song for the *hora* dance, which

124 Brenner, *Writings in Yiddish*, p. 210.

125 Barash, Lamdan, p. 4. On the reception of *Massada* see Hadari, “The Attitude to ‘Massada.’”

126 Sadan, “On Yitzhak Lamdan,” p. 502.

127 Lamdan, “Diary,” pp. 174, 226-229, 315.

was part and parcel of the Zionist experience. Hassidic mysticism infiltrated into the very bone of Zionist culture in Eretz-Israel, mixing with the revolutionary ecstasy of the pioneers and expressing itself in literary works, especially poetry.

The Russian Context, Soloviev and Bialik's poetry

Was Zionism then the cause for the growing interest of Jewish intellectuals and writers in mysticism, or one of its channels? And if it was the cause for this search of new Jewish identity, why did Jewish intellectuals seek their roots in Kabbalah and Hassidism, not in the Bible, which corresponded better with the ideal of a return to Zion?

The answer to this question lies in the European cultural context at the turn of the 20th century. When European high culture moved from the ideals of the Enlightenment to a reevaluation of Eastern and Christian mysticisms, Jewish intellectuals turned to their own sources of mysticism; Martin Buber wrote his Ph.D. thesis on the Christian mystics Nicolas de Cusa and Jakob Boehme before turning to Rabbi Nahman.

Mysticism and messianism were more central in Russian more than in Western Christianity.¹²⁸ Russian Freemasons took great interest in Kabbalah, to which they were introduced via Christianity,¹²⁹ and during the second half of the 19th century, Russian intellectuals took interest in Kabbalah, magic and sorcery.¹³⁰ Dostoevsky's novels were a battle cry against Russian Positivism, showing the way to the sources of Russian mysticism. Russian interest in mysticism flourished in Russia at the turn of the 20th century, together with revolutionary Marxism, under the slogan "A Revolution of the Spirit."¹³¹ The mystic and poet Vladimir Soloviev (1853-1900) had an enormous influence on his contemporaries and on a whole generation of theologians and

128 Duncan, *Russian Messianism*.

129 Burmistrov and Endel, "Kabbalah in Russian Masonry."

130 Burmisrov, "Kabbala in Russian Philosophy."

131 Rosenthal and Bohachevsky, *A Revolution of the Spirit*.

poets at the beginning of the 20th century.¹³² Soloviev introduced a utopian anti-Nietzschean and ecumenical teaching, using elements from Jewish and Christian Kabbalah. Soloviev founded a neo-mystical movement, which tried to return the Russian people to the “Eastern” roots of Russian culture.

Soloviev wrote many essays against anti-Semitism in Russia, admired Judaism, had Jewish friends in St. Petersburg (one of whom was the Baron Horace Ginzburg), learned Hebrew and read the Bible and the Mishna in the original. During 1880-1900, Hebrew and Russian Jewish journalism covered his pro-Jewish activities, his lectures and his philosophical writings. He won the Jewish title *hassid umot ha-olam* (a righteous of the nations) and after his death, prayers for his soul took place in many synagogues in Russia. Essays about his personality and teachings were written in Hebrew and Russian by Jewish scholars and writers (among them Hillel Zeitlin), including a translation of one of his poems into Hebrew.¹³³ Soloviev was well-known to Jewish scholars, intellectuals and writers in Russia.¹³⁴

Mysticism was attractive also for assimilated Jewish intellectuals such as Nikolay Minsky (Vilenkin) and Akim Volynsky (Flekser), who began their careers by publishing in Russian-Jewish journals. Minsky in his two philosophical mystical books *In the Light of Conscience* (1887) and *The Religion of the Future* (1905)¹³⁵ introduced “Meonizm” (from the Greek *me on* = not existing), a mystical existential teaching based on the concept of God as non-existent (reminiscent of the Kabbalistic Ayin, Nothing, as a title of the highest divine source). His ideas raised the criticism of Soloviev, Berdiaev and others, but left traces on early 20th century Russian neo-Mysticism. Volynsky became famous as the editor of the monthly *Severnny Vestnik*, which was the Russian gate to *fin de siècle* Western European culture. On this arena Volynsky published his series of articles “For Idealism” (published in book form in 1900), in which he attacked Russian positivism and materialism and preached philosophical idealism. From 1880 to 1884, Volynsky studied law in St. Petersburg University,

132 Sutton, *Soloviev*.

133 Syrkin, “Soloviev.”

134 Bar-Yosef, “The Jewish Reception of Soloviev.”

135 Minsky, *In the Light of Conscience*; idem., *The Religion of the Future*.

where he made friends with Dubnov and became a supporter of Zionism.¹³⁶ In 1897-1902, Dubnov's series of essays "Letters on Old and New Judaism" were published in *Voskhod*, and in the third of these "letters" the concept of nationality is expressed in a long debate with Soloviev's essay "The National Problem from a Moral Point of View." Dubnov also mentioned Soloviev and his pro-Jewish activity in his *History of the Jewish People*.¹³⁷

Soloviev had a wide Jewish reading public. He was mentioned in the writings of Y.L. Gordon, Moshe Lilienblum and Ahad Ha-Am. In 1905 Rabbi Kook called Soloviev "a righteous of the nations"¹³⁸ in his letter to Zionist pioneers. Rabbi Kook's acquaintance with Soloviev was perhaps a result of his correspondence with Rabbi Shmuel Alexandrov, who in 1907 recommended Soloviev's writings to Rabbi Kook and remarked: "Sages like Soloviev are close to Judaism in their souls, all he [Soloviev] wishes is eternal Justice."¹³⁹ In another letter to Rabbi Kook, Alexandrov cited from Soloviev's essay "The Justification of Goodness" (1899), together with a reference to an essay on Soloviev which was published in *Voprosy Filosofii I Psikhologii*.¹⁴⁰

Soloviev and Russian neo-mysticism as a whole left clear traces on Bialik's literary work. Unlike his contemporaries, Bialik never mentioned Soloviev, nor the Symbolist poets who were Soloviev's disciples (Alexander Blok, Viacheslav Ivanov, Andrey Biely). In Bialik's library in Tel-Aviv, which he moved to Odessa after a few years in Berlin, one can find Soloviev's book *Judaism and the Christian Problem*. Bialik knew Viacheslav Ivanov and other symbolist poets, with whom he worked when they were translating his poems into Russian for the *Jewish Anthology of Young Jewish Poetry* (1918, edited by Leib Yaffe and Vladislav Khodassievich). Bialik knew Russian symbolist poetry and discussed it with his friend Yaacov Fichman as early as 1905.¹⁴¹ His essay "Uncovering and Covering

136 Dubnov, *The Book of my Life*, pp. 123-124. Kelner, *A Missioner of History*, pp. 84, 87, 111.

137 Dubnov, *Jewish History*, vol 10 pp. 91-92.

138 Kook, *Letters*, vol 1 p. 18.

139 Alexandrov, *Letters of Research and Criticism*, p. 18.

140 Ibid., p. 30.

141 Fichman, *Writers in their Lives*, pp. 54-55; idem, *Bialik's Poetry*, p. 140.

by Language” (1915) bears clear traces of Andrey Biely’s mystical theory of language as was formulated in his essay “The Magic of Language” (1910).¹⁴²

Bialik could also get acquainted with Russian neo-mysticism through his contacts with the poet and Russian theologian Alexandr Gorsky-Gornostaev (1886-1943), one of the founders of the *Golgoftsy* (Golgothean) sect, who in 1917-1918 translated Bialik’s poems into Russian with the poet’s help.¹⁴³ Gorsky was a Russian priest who was greatly impressed by the writings of Dostoevsky and Soloviev. He participated in the meetings of the Moscow Religious-Philosophic society, read symbolist poetry and contemporary Russian philosophy (Florensky, Ternavtsev, Shestov) and wrote his own poems. Like Soloviev, he also learned Hebrew, read the Old Testament and was friendly with Jewish intellectuals, including Lev Shestov. In 1910 he read the writings of the Russian mystic Nikolay Fiodorov (1829-1903), the founder of the *Kosmizm* movement, and in 1911 he decided to reject the office of Bishop and to dedicate his life to ascetic wandering for the sake of Russian and universal redemption. The lives of Fiodorov and Soloviev were his models for this decision, but unlike them he got married before beginning his wandering, because he considered the mutual worship of a married couple a stage on the way to unity with God.

In 1911-1913 Gorsky lived in Moscow, where together with Yona Brikhnichev he founded the *Golgoftsy* and edited the short-lived weekly *Novoje Vino* (Dec 1912- Jan1913). The *Golgoftsy* members were God-seekers, non-Orthodox religious Russians who admired Fiodorov and Soloviev. They believed in the spiritual revival of Russian Christianity by active redemptive activity, which joins personal and collective aims. Following Soloviev, they respected Judaism, encouraged Jewish writers and wrote against anti-Semitism. Gorsky’s poems, first collected in his *With a Deep Morning: Psalms* (1913), show the influence of Soloviev and Blok. In his introduction to this book, Gorsky wrote that for modern man, poetry should be part of the worship of God. He laid stress on the importance of the poetic word in times of moral crisis, on the way to worthy spiritual life and on Judaism as an important source for Russian redemption. The words אהיה אשר אהיה are written in this introduction in Hebrew letters.

142 Bar-Yosef, “Biely and Bialik”

143 Bar-Yosef, “Gorsky.”

In 1913, Gorsky and Brikhnichev came to Odessa, where they edited the Fiodorov-oriented periodical *Vselenskoje Delo* (The Universal Deed) together. The first issue appeared in 1914, and it included Gorsky's poems, one of which is dedicated to Soloviev, and his article on the contacts between the teachings of Soloviev and Fiodorov (this is also the theme of Gorsky's book *Rai Na Zemlie* (Heaven Upon Earth, 1929). On the last page of this publication one can see the contents of the next issue. It includes an essay by Hayim Nahman Bialik under the title "The Problem of Resurrection in the Talmud." This essay, which probably was promised by Bialik to the editors, was never published, as *Vselelnskoje Delo* ceased to appear, in all likelihood due to the beginning of the First World War. The materials for this essay can be found, however, in the 1914-1917 edition of *Sefer Ha'agada*, edited by Bialik and Ravnitsky. In 1917-1918 Gorsky translated many of Bialik's poems which were not translated by Zhabotinsky into Russian. He worked with the poet himself and prepared a new edition of Bialik's poems in Russian, translated by himself and others. Gorsky left the manuscript in Bialik's hands, but it was never published in book form, for reasons which are out of the scope of this essay.

Could Bialik be involved in such close connections with Russian neo-mystics without knowing about their beliefs and ideas, without reading their writings? Certainly not. And even if he did not have such personal contacts, it is not possible that Jewish intellectuals, even if their Russian was far from perfect, did not read contemporary Russian literature, which at the beginning of the 20th century was absorbed with neo-mysticism.

We can sum up by saying that at the turn of the 20th century, Jewish intellectuals and writers in Russia were well acquainted with contemporary Russian neo-mysticism, a fact which encouraged their interest in Jewish mysticism. During this period, some Russian writers and thinkers were trying to blur the border between Christianity and Judaism by mixing early Christian and Jewish elements together into a new ecumenical teaching. This ecumenical atmosphere was part of the Russian non-Orthodox neo-Christianity. The revival of Jewish mysticism, which was closer to this new Christian mysticism than was Orthodox Judaism to Christianity, enabled Jews to join modern European culture without losing their Jewish identity. In fact, Jewish writers' sympathy toward Jesus and early Christianity was part of the same neo-mystical

atmosphere. This was a change in the concept of Judaism and in Jewish identity, which took place in Russia about twenty years before the beginning of Buber's neo-Hassidic activity. It was the product of writers no less than of scholars. It was connected with the influence of Solovievian neo-mysticism and of literary Symbolism, which in Russia was national and messianic.

The reevaluation of Jewish mysticism in modern Jewish thought and scholarship did not begin with Martin Buber and Gershom Scholem, and Zionism was not the main drive of this move. Considerable activity by Jewish writers and scholars in late 19th century Russia preceded Buber's and Scholem's projects and laid the groundwork for them. In the Russian context, the change took place not only in academic scholarship, but also and even more so in literature, which in Russia was an active, dominant cultural factor. In the literary context this change is connected with literary Symbolism, which in Russia at the turn of the 20th century was the dominant modern stream. Jewish writers turned to Jewish mystical roots because they wanted to write Jewish modern literature and also because they believed that such literature would revive their dying religion and create a new one.

CHAPTER THREE

Unity, Ecstasy, and Visions

Mystical Unity

Mystical unity with God is considered by many scholars of religion as the theological and psychological kernel of the mystical experience in any culture, especially in monotheistic religions.¹ *Unio Mystica* (the Jewish term is *dveikut*) is sometimes used as a criterion for the definition of a mystical experience. Underhill wrote: “Mysticism in its pure form is [...] the science of the unity with the Absolute [...] and the mystic is the person who achieves this unity.”²

Christian and Jewish scholars, among them Gershom Scholem, believed that Judaism does not allow full mystical unity; it only acknowledges mystical experiences which “soften the borders between the Divine and the human.”³ Scholem argued that unlike Christian mysticism, Kabbalah avoids full unity, because from the theological point of view such a unity with God does not fall into line with the idea of a transcendent God; such a unity presupposes an immanent, intimate God — an idea which is alien to Judaism.⁴ This view was rejected by contemporary scholars, who proved that Jewish

1 See Idel and McGeen, *Mystical Unity*, especially Dupré, “Unio Mystica,” pp. 4-7; Waajman, “Mysticism”; Idel, “Universalization and Integration”; Pedaia, “Re’iya, nephila shira.” Gershom Scholem, while arguing that every religion has its own mysticism (*Kabbalah*, pp. 3, 5-6) viewed the experience of *unio mystica* as a point of departure to any discussion of the concept of mysticism (Margolin, *The Temple of Man*, p. 24).

2 Underhill, *Mysticism*, p. 72. See also Pike, *Mystic Union*; Mercure, “Unitive Experience,” p. 126.

3 Helner-Eshed, *A River*, pp. 379-385. See also Altman, “God and His Being,” p. 81.

4 Scholem, “Devekut”; *Trends*, pp. 55-56. Scholem admitted the presence of ecstatic unity in the Heikhalot literature, in Abulafia, Sabbatai Zvi and Hassidism, but not in the Kabbalah, which was his main focus. See also Tishbi, *Zohar*, vol 2, pp. 289-290. For a review of the scholarly rejection of unity in Jewish mysticism see Idel, *New Perspectives*, pp. 77-79; *Patterns of Redeeming Activity*.

mystical texts do contain descriptions of and prescriptions for a full union with God.⁵

Mystics describe their experience of unity as an astonishing, sudden, solemn and elevating feeling. It brings about an inner sensation of liberation and purification from the inferior everyday existence, together with a feeling of absolute perfection. The mystic feels as if he has passed into another, higher, level of existence, where he is provided with miraculous abilities. This passage to another level of existence is perceived as contact or even unity with a divine sacredness, which grants the mystic a feeling of revelation of a hidden truth, as if the whole of existence is enlightened, and things which he could not see before appear to him.⁶ These feelings of redemption and achievement of perfection accompany highly positive emotions.

Many scholars of mysticism reject the view according to which only God — or the God of a certain religion — can be a mystical goal. Instead they accept that there is a range of mystical experiences, and their goals are not uniform and are not all related to God. They can, nonetheless, be described as feelings of unification with a sacred, super-terrestrial being.⁷ On this basis we shall examine poems which describe meetings with what the poet considers to be a divine sacredness.

5 Idel, “Universalization and Integration,” pp. 28, 42; Gottlieb, *Researches*, p. 237.

6 The component of insight and revelation of religious truth was called “the noetic element” by William James. Lasky and others argued that even among non-religious people ecstasy can be accompanied by a feeling of revelation of a hidden truth.

7 See Bucke, *Cosmic Consciousness*; Zahner, *Mysticism Sacred and Profane*, esp. p. 32; James, *The Religious Experience*; Mercure, “Unitive Experience and Trans”; Buber wrote that mystical ecstasy is a unification with the world and with the self (Buber, introduction to *Ecstatic Confessions*, pp. 3, 5). Idel describes the understanding of *dveikut* in various schools of Jewish mysticism as an “integration of the human into the archaic unity, half of which is divine” (*New Perspectives*, p. 81). Elsewhere Idel wrote that it is not the mystical object which determines the presence and the intensity of the ecstatic mystical experience, but its emotional and physical aspects as well as the means by which the experience should be repeated or achieved (Idel, *Unio Mystica as a Criterion*). Haviva Pedaia wrote about the mystical experience of Avraham, the son of Maimonides: “The question whether he is speaking about God Himself is of secondary importance in relation to the diagnosis itself, that we have here a unitive experience, because the ways of language of hiding and limitations and the fixation of religious boundaries are different in different normative contexts” (Pedaia, *The Sight and the Speech*, p. 183).

Unachievable Unity

Against the background of transcendental theology, man's meeting with the divine sacredness is an astonishing achievement. Failure to achieve this goal is sometimes described in traditional Jewish mystical texts.⁸ Within a cultural context where mystical ideas and practices are the religious norm, descriptions of contact with God can be clichés and do not necessarily testify to extraordinarily strong religious experiences. In order to fairly evaluate the authenticity, the originality, the power and the courage of such descriptions, one should therefore take into consideration the cultural context in which the literary text was written.

Modern Hebrew literary descriptions of meetings with sacredness, or even of yearning for such meetings, were written in a cultural context which rejects not only the possibility of meeting with sacredness, but even the very existence of absolute sacredness. Therefore, in modern Hebrew literature the experience of mystical unity is sometimes described as problematic and dramatic, more often than it is in texts written in cultures in which mystical experience was viewed as a legitimate possibility.

From this point of view, the idea of a human meeting with a divine sacredness is an empty, unacceptable idea. The poet's decision to describe it as possible is a daring, non-conformist step, a certain revolt against accepted views, maybe out of identification with another culture in which such an experience is acceptable, or out of nostalgia for such a culture. For a poet who grew up in a secular culture and who does not know about the world of mysticism, the mere discovery of the need for sacredness can be confusing, embarrassing or frightening. The doubt in the existence of sacredness is part of the modern secular world view, its clearest expression being found in Nietzsche's happy cry "God is dead!" Within the frame of such a world-view the mystical experience is fake, eyewash, an obscurant invention, and God is an empty void.

Modern Hebrew poems sometimes describe the modern man's failures on his way to sacredness and the obstacles which reality raises before whoever wishes to meet it. The failure and the obstacles are described with deep pain,

8 Gottlieb, *Researches*, p. 241.

proving the authenticity and the vitality of the yearnings for sacred unity. This experience of continuing knocking on the locked gate of divine sacredness became famous from Kafka's novel, *The Castle*, and from "The Story of the Guard" in his novel *The Process*. The mere lament on the death of God and the search after Him testify to His presence in the consciousness and to the need to find Him.

In his poem "He Peeped and Died," (1917)⁹ Bialik described the obstacle-obstructed path of Ben-Azai, one of the four men who "entered the *pardes* (the paradise orchard, symbol of the world of God)" according to the Talmudic story.¹⁰ The poem is based on this story, which includes Rabbi Akiva's warnings about the dangers awaiting the mystic who enters the *pardes*. It describes the way to God as a passage through a series of fifty gates, in accordance with later Jewish mystical descriptions of the upper world. Bialik described Ben-Azai as an extremely heroic person, ready to risk his life for his mission, bearing a burning torch. The last trait is an allusion to the myth of Prometheus. It also reminds of the autobiographical hero, who holds the torch of mission in his hand, in Bialik's long poem "The Scroll of Fire" (1905). "He Peeped and Died" is a personal confession of Bialik himself.

In the poem the hero does reach his goal: the doors of the fiftieth gate are opened, but the torch, the symbol of the sacred mission, is extinguished. The hero himself falls down and dies "on the threshold of the *belima*" (literally: nothing, void, according to Job 26:7. The word *belima* is underlined in the original. It is the only underlined word in Bialik's poetry). Did Ben-Azai in Bialik's poem succeed in uniting with God? The answer to this question is not unequivocal even in the original Talmudic story. Ben-Azai's way to mystical death is not recommended to every mystic. The terrestrial one should follow the way of Rabbi Akiva, who entered the *pardes*, but also came back safely to the regular world. The method of Ben-Azai, who sacrificed his life in order to achieve contact with God, is fit only for the chosen very few. Was the hero of "He Peeped and Died" one of those who achieved God by death? The critic Baruch Kurzweil did not think so. He argued that the word "*belima*" expresses

9 Bialik, *Poems 1899-1934*, pp. 353-354.

10 The story appears in the Talmud in various versions. For an analysis of this story, including its versions, see Liebes, *Elisha's Sin*.

the poet's despair of the chance to reach divine sacredness, and even Bialik's disbelief in the existence of God.¹¹ Disagreeing with Kurzweil, Hillel Barzel and Zvi Luz pointed out the positive use of *belima* in the mystical Book of Creation, where "ten *sephirot* of *belima*" means the heavenly world, where God is present in various degrees.¹²

In order to understand Bialik's stance toward the possibility of achieving mystical unity, we should notice the description of the hero's way: the hero chooses the most "crooked" path, which seems to him as the "straightest of paths"; his eyes are gradually dimmed and his spirit becomes "not right" (insane). Worst of all, he becomes so tired that he begins to crawl and to lick the soil, like a snake. When he reaches the fiftieth gate his torch is extinguished. This expresses that his journey to the sacred goal does not elevate him. His superhuman efforts make him deteriorate to the most extreme spiritual inferiority. It is enough to compare "He Peeped and Died" with Bialik's poem "My Light Was Not Unearned," which was written 14 years earlier, to see the difference: in the earlier poem the poet sacrifices himself for his mission, and his sacrifice is a source of light to his readers, while in the later one the light which he carries (the torch) is extinguished, and he dies "on the threshold of the *belima*," before coming in. Kurzweil's interpretation is correct, then: the hero's way to his sacred mission is not only a total failure, it is also a waste of all his life's investments. In "He Peeped and Died" Bialik — like Kafka — expressed his despair of ever reaching the wonderful feeling of ecstatic mystical unity with God.

However, even if this is a poem of despair and skepticism about the existence of absolute sacredness, it is still a powerful description of the yearning for unity with that sacredness, of the superhuman efforts which were invested in reaching it, and of the terrible, death-like disappointment of the absence of God.

Modern Hebrew poets sometimes paradoxically turn to God, even if describing Him as nothing but a hollow void whose manifestations are but deceitful delusions. Avraham Halfi (1904-1980) was a non-observant poet and theater actor who was born in Poland and lived in Tel-Aviv beginning in 1924.

11 Kurzweil, "He Peeped and Died."

12 Barzel, "He Peeped and Died"; Luz, "He Peeped and Died." For more interpretation of this poem see Dan, "He Peeped and Died," Luria, "He Peeped and Died"; Peles, "He Peeped and Died."

In his poem “A Dream of Your Traces,” he wrote: “I looked for You, but did not find You/ I looked for You covered in a cloud./ A full mouth of honey I gathered from Your mouth,/ I saw Your traces in the Garden. (...) But who are You? Who? What is the image of Your transfigurations?/ Reveal Your face to me, the wanderer/ in the saddest kingdom on earth./ (...) And though the space is void — (...) I looked for You in the heat / and in the dew.”¹³ The poet complains to God about His desertion of human beings, His ordering them to live and die in embarrassment, but he still feels that all the beauty in this world is a revelation of God. The last words of the poem, “I looked for You in the heat and in the dew” hint that God appears in moments of both disappointment and hope. In Halfi’s poem “There is a White Night”¹⁴ (dedicated to Nathan Alterman) Halfi described God as follows: “One/ which is many,/ not-Who/ on the throne/ of present-absent fogs,/ One Is/ who reigns over man’s dream.” Here God can be many various things, and his kingdom is not in reality but in dreams. To that God the poet prays. He even feels the burning touch of “the purity of nothingness,” which is beyond knowledge: “I shall pray, I shall say my word/ for the one I am with-and-without — / to the fire which devours the sin of its burning,/ to the purity of nothingness,/ of the non-known to me.” The assumption that God is both absent and present, existent and non-existent, creates a paradox, *coincidentia oppositorum*, one of the characteristics of traditional mystical literature.

Secular poets sometimes describe the impossibility of mystical unity as a situation of closed gates, a clogged burrow, or of a contamination which happened as a result of the secular modern situation. Ben Yitzhak in his poem “The Lonely Say” (see ch. 1), after describing the degeneration of his contemporary dying culture, mourns: “and to-morrow we shall die, having no word and no deed,/ and with what we were born we shall stand at the gate when it is being closed.”

The closed gate, with the same meaning, appears in Yair Hurvitz’s poem “Clouds 1,” where the heavenly world is symbolized by “a city”: “And the city is locked by thousands of bolts (...) and the light of gates is living in one of the

13 Halfi, *Poems*, vol 1, p. 118.

14 *Ibid.*, pp. 182-183.

thousands of bolts (...) for there are hundreds of keys to thousands of locked bolts.”¹⁵ Yair Hurvitz (1941-1988), a good friend of Yona Wollach, had a religious education in his childhood, but since his youth he belonged, together with Wollach, to the circle of Tel-Aviv Avant-Guard Bohemianism.

The same symbol of the closed gate or the missing of the open gate can also be found in the poetry of modern Hebrew poets who grew up in a religious family and as adults kept a moderately religious way of life, or simply did not completely disconnect themselves from religion. For example, Hayim Brandwein (1921-1996), born in Jerusalem to an Orthodox family of the “Old Yishuv,” in his poem “I Looked for Fog” mourned and ironically reproached himself and his generation for missing the opportunities of entering the gates of God: “My God how you helped me/ to fry myself in my own gravy/ all the gates were open/ and I looked for fog/ and found it.”¹⁶ The images of the poem imply that the poet’s generation was seeking extreme, even painful experiences, but reaching unity only with their own material egos. The motivation for seeking after the “fog” was the need of sacredness, but the sort of fog which was found and interiorized was the opposite of real sacredness, which was missed.

The image of the closed entrance also appears in Shalom Ratsabi’s poem “In What Has Neither Time Nor Place,”¹⁷ describing the efforts to reach a close contact with God in spite of angels, “who always bang the place at me.” Ratsabi misuses the expression “to bang the door,” exchanging “door” with “place” (*makom* in Hebrew), which is also a name for God. Ratsabi was born in 1951 to Moroccan-Yemenite parents, and some of his grandparents were kabbalists. Many of his poems are close to mysticism, but he did not maintain a religious lifestyle..

In the modern context, mystical unity is impossible because God is impossible. However, this impossibility becomes an intimate emotional presence in

15 Hurvitz, *The Fate of the Garden*, pp. 219-220.

16 Brandwein, “The Secret of Melody,” *The Secret of Melody*, p. 240. See also his poem “Attentive,” where the poet mocks his generation for being too easily brought to admit their mistake, so to speak, and to give up the wonders of religious belief, while cultivating their sensitivity to any “rustle boo-boo in the darkness.” *Ibid.*, p. 212.

17 Ratsabi, *Waiting for Him*, p. 57.

the poet's consciousness. Mordechai Georgo Langer in his poem "From the Tops of the Silence's Hills" wrote: "On the top of a rock we were sitting and thinking/ about the great impossible./ Our silence was pregnant, it gave birth to terror./ And before our eyes, here it was, the wide open space of God was spreading/ and on the horizon the sky kissed the earth and they were both melting./ And we shall sit, we shall keep silent, looking at the sublime open space/ and think about the impossible." The poet refers here to the chasm between the rational point of view, according to which God is impossible, on the one hand, and the immediate experience of nature and the mystical unspeakable emotions it raises, on the other. He ironically speaks of the habit to speak about God as impossible while His presence is clearly revealed. Mordechai Georgo Langer (1894-1943) was born in Prague to an assimilated Jewish family, but at the age of 19 he left Prague, became a *hassid* of the Rabbi of Belz, and came back to Prague as an Orthodox Jew, living there until 1941, when he made *aliya* to Israel. He was a close friend of Franz Kafka.

Amir Gilboa (see ch. 1) in one of his untitled poems¹⁸ described the poet's failure to pray to God from the bottom of his heart by comparing the poet's heart to a torn *siddur* (book of prayers). It was torn together with the belief in God by the terrible historical events which the poet and the whole Jewish people experienced during the 20th century. The poet compares his yearning for God to pieces of paper from the torn *siddur*, which are flying like Noah's dove, looking in vain for a place where they can rest. The allusion to the deluge hints to the traumatic historical events and to their psychological footprints in him: this reality strikes the face of whoever needs contact with sacredness, and does not allow the poet a redeeming inner peace. In spite of this, his effort to pray comes from the depths of his heart. It is a sincere effort which rises from the deepest place of his being.

In another untitled poem, Gilboa compared himself to a synagogue's *shamash* (beadle), who finds out that throughout his life he has served impurity, mistakenly taking it for sacredness. The poet realizes that he belongs to a naïve generation, who "in days of sun went like the blind in a chimney/ and worshipped God with love and awe," but God mocked them and alienated

18 The poem begins with the words "I am praying from the heart *sidur*," Poems, vol 2, p. 13. This is one of Gilboa's later poems.

Himself from them. The poet views this generation's worship of God, even if based on a mistake, as a perfect devotion, replete with the love and awe of children for their father.

The Israeli-born poet Yona Wollach (1944-1985) in her poem "Over There, There Is" described the impassable chasm between the heavenly sacred world and the terrestrial world. The real world is called here "the other side." It is the place where everybody is "hiding in the reals" (וְהוֹבֵאִים בְּמַחְשֵׁים), and therefore everybody is "silent" and "not flowing."¹⁹ In her poem "I Shall Never Hear the Sweet Voice of God," Wollach mourned the disappearance of her chance to again experience an intimate meeting with God.²⁰ Yona Wollach was famous for her bohemian lifestyle, which included smoking drugs. She wrote feminist, anti-establishment poetry. One of her poems, in which the speaker asks her lover to use the *tephilin* for sexual arousal, caused a major scandal.

The Israeli-born Gavriella Elisha (born in 1954) in her poem "Sometimes On the Verge of Crisis"²¹ described the poet's great embarrassment when she felt yearnings for mystical unity; how strange this feeling was, and how much she hesitated to express this experience, whose object of attraction is dubious: "How to express the love in my heart/ and how the burst of joy/ which in a flash has no end/ how to express the lightness of feeling/ and how heavy like death/ and how you melt (...) into what the books describe as a womb (...) how Nothingness attracts me, so it seems." The words "what the books describe" and "so it seems" characterize the speaker's point of view, which is alien to the existence of mystical experiences. It expresses the poet's hesitations about her right to trust the ecstatic feelings that come over her. In her poem "From Pure and Clear Fountains,"²² Elisha expressed the strangeness of the mystical experience in the inner world of a person who feels like a "foul fountain": "From pure and clear fountains of life/ it is strange that you a foul fountain/ hears a pure clear fountain gushing/ among your breaths/ seeking for the great depth of the ocean/ the praises of infinity/ infinity fine/ fine end you are free." Such feelings of wonder and hesitation are expressed by traditional mystics as well,

19 Wollach, *Poetry*, p. 127.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 113.

21 Elisha, *Inspiration*, p. 29.

22 Elisha, *Texts*, pp. 7-8.

but in the secular context they have an additional dimension of breaking the basic conventions of secular thinking. Gavriella Elisha, born to a Sephardic family, is a lesbian who lives in Jerusalem in a very individualistic way, disconnected from established religion.

In his poem "I Have Already Gone to No Place" Amir Gilboa described the mysterious, unconscious growth of yearning for sacredness, out of nihilism and a complete absence of religious belief. In spite of vagueness about his belief in God, the poet clearly feels the yearning for sacredness, which is to be found outside of his own world. The tone of the speaker in this poem slides from fatigue, irony and even sarcasm to a powerful demand from a sacred being: "I have already touched no place. Already/ reached no place. Already/ came back from no place. Already/ have a place in no place better/ than that cannot be found in no place as a whole/ before you ask whatever your soul would ask/ dying to no place like that/ under the sky above and the land/ under there is no place sacred sacred/ sacred more than that filling the no place/ and with all that I shall wait for me in every place."²³ The poem is about the strange yearnings to "no place," the repetitive word "place" (*makom* in Hebrew) leading the reader to understand it as a reference to God. These seem to be paradoxical yearnings for something which does not exist, and still is the best of all places. Gilboa defined God as something which is beyond the reach of the human mind, following traditional kabbalists, who called God by the name of Nothingness (*ayin*). The strange, twisted, paradoxical style of the poem expresses the search for sacredness and then its gradual bursting forth from the depths of unconsciousness. The poem describes the psychic process which leads from the denial of sacredness to a declaration of unequivocal loyalty and devotion to Jewish religiosity. The triple repetition of the word "sacred" alludes to the song of the angels in Isaiah's vision of the heavenly choir (Isaiah 6:3).

Yair Hurvitz in his poem "The Secret Terrace" asked God to mercifully accept a prayer which is unconscious to itself, rising from spiritual poverty and confusion: "When rainbows are bowing upon the west have mercy on our shadow/ which is dying on the slopes of the mountains./ Here is our dwelling. Here/ our poverty. (...) We have sanctified the profane by rituals and

23 Gilboa, *Poems*, vol. 2, p. 37.

worship,/trampling our shadow casting our eyes/ praying for the heights./ Hear and look, naked are our voices/ Please heal,/please heal!/ And for your redemption we wait.”²⁴ Western culture, seemingly protected and worshipped by the heavenly, colorful rainbows, is covering the fact that its spiritual existence is no more than a shadow, a poor existence. The profane is worshipped as if it was sacred, hence life becomes a trampling on our own shadows. At the end of the poem, in a moment of inner nakedness, the poet finds refuge in the ancient Jewish prayer, citing the words *רָפָא נָא רָפָא נָא וְלִישׁוּעָתְךָ קוּיִי* from the Eighteen Benedictions.

The strange, paradoxical feeling of modern man when he is anticipating the experience of mystical unity is clearly formulated in Ayelet Solomon’s poem: “I for example/ every day I wait for the word of God/ sitting in the veranda and smoking cigarette/ after cigarette/ ready for him to flood me/ with living water.”²⁵ This poem, which was published in 1999 in the religious journal *Mashiv Ha-ru’ach*, was written by a teen-age girl, a poet and artist, who lives in Jerusalem and is moderately religious.

Because of the theological problem, religious poets very carefully describe the contact with God. The word “distant” is crucial in Rabbi Kook’s poem “From a Distant World,” beginning with “And from a distant world (...) tidings reach me.”²⁶ Rabbi Kook’s contemporary and friend, the religious poet Yosef Zvi Rimmon, (1889 — 1958, made *aliya* in 1909) in his poem “*Piut* [a religious poem]” implores God to “Roar, my lion-father,”²⁷ a metaphor which implies both intimacy and awe, even distance and fear. Zelda, in the poem “Every Rose”²⁸ (see ch. 1) described the illusion of physical intimate closeness to the Rose, a symbol of sacredness, even smelling its odor, but the poem ends with the understanding that in order to reach the Rose one should cross “a sea of fire.” In the poem “The Banquet,”²⁹ however, Zelda daringly described her physical, intimate meeting with the divine worlds.

24 Hurvitz, *The Fate of the Garden*, p. 15.

25 Ayelet Solomon, Untitled, *Mashiv ha-ru’akh* 6 (1999), p. 66.

26 Kook, *My Soul Listens to Its Song*, p. 16.

27 Rimmon, *Crowns*, p. 84.

28 Zelda, *Poems*, p. 59.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 51.

Even secular poets sometimes emphasize the distance: Amir Gilboa described the heavenly world thus: “Far away far away at the edge of the look/ life are rustling. Everybody is wearing Shabbat clothes/ men and women./ Almonds blooms are sprouting from their sticks./ Calmed down morning wind/ is whispering in the women’s eyes.// And death has no living/ and life has no dead./ A big street is walking./ An echo is delivering the voice/a voice is delivering the echo./ Eternity reigns.”³⁰ The distance is implied in Zoussman’s long mystical poem “A Dry Sunshine,”³¹ in which the poet gives up the chance to see God’s sight and even to hear His speech, but he does hear “another singing (...) the language of other forms” — the heavenly music. Pinhas Sadeh, (1929-1994, see ch. 4) in his poem “The Arabic Flute,”³² heard the voice of God in the sound of an Arabic flute which arrives from the deserts of Syria, which is for the Israeli poet an unreachable place, although geographically it is not far away.

It is noteworthy that even religious modern Hebrew poets who describe the poet’s yearning for contact with God express the theme of doubt in His existence. This theme is clearly formulated in Itamar Yazo-Kest’s poem “The Difficulty to Speak with God.”³³ Here the poet compares himself to someone who drives on the curved road to Jerusalem, trying to see a mountain which has disappeared behind the curve, and whose existence thus becomes dubious: “Without the certainty/ of sacredness or profanity/ and even without the certainty of the place itself.” Here again the word *makom* has the same double meaning of both place and God. Late in the poem it says that in fact “Sometimes/ from thinking of You/ the thoughts are going and running short from me./ and I totally lose You.” The poet feels how difficult it is to give in his thinking, while independent thinking is the most cultivated human activity in modern culture. Itamar Yazo-Kest was born in 1943 in Hungary; he survived the Shoah, made *aliya* in 1951, and later became observant.

Rivka Miriam in her poem “I Have Nobody But *Tohu*” described a powerful but very sad mystical experience in a world which seems void of God: “I have

30 Gilboa, *Poems*, vol. 2, p. 98.

31 Zoussman, *Poems*, pp. 240-242.

32 Sadeh, *Poems*, p. 166.

33 Yazo-Kest, *Summons*, p. 28.

nobody but *Tohu* [chaos]/ and *Tohu* has no wife but me./ and we kiss each other over the chasm/ and darkness is over the chasm./ and *Tohu* has no wife but me. And *Tohu* is an orphan and I am an orphan and our spirit is hovering above the water.”³⁴ Rivka Miriam is a poet and a painter, born in 1952 to parents who had survived the Shoah. She received a moderately religious education which was very open to literature and art. She lives in Jerusalem, is politically close to Gush Emunim, and is one of the founders of *Elul*, an institute which brings together religious and non-religious people for study of Jewish sources.

Against the background of “practical Zionism,” which rejected mysticism, denounced it and even considered it dangerous to the Zionist project, Hebrew Zionist poets sometimes described the yearnings for Jewish sacredness as an inner conflict, accompanied by feelings of guilt. Such feelings of guilt are present, for example, in the poetry of Avraham Shlonsky (1900-1973). He was born to a Hassidic family in Ukraine and at the age of 13 was sent to Eretz-Israel. Shlonsky was the central figure among the leftist writers in 1930s-1940 Eretz-Israel. He considered poets — including himself, of course — to be “prophets,” spiritual and moral leaders, in the vein of 19th century Russian literature and its Jewish literary heritage. Against this background, dedication to mystical experiences and their vague poetic expressions seemed like a desertion of both the public role and the participation in the collective project. Such feelings of guilt appear in Shlonsky’s cycle of poems *Ashrai* (Happy am I), written in the late 1920s.³⁵ The first poem opens with a confession of the “crime” of betraying the “brothers.” The poet deserts them in order to join a mysterious character, called *Peli* (the wonderful or the miraculous), whom he can hear at night harnessing his horses, preparing for a long way. This *Peli* has a chariot and horses of fire, images which bring to mind the fire chariot and the fire horses with which the prophet Eliyahu rose to heaven (King 2 2:11) as well as the four horses in Revelation ch. 6. The speaker now announces his readiness to set out together with *Peli*, in spite of his “crime” against his brothers. The second poem opens with a description of a visionary apparition and the ecstatic excitement which it arouses in the poet: “I set out embarrassed

34 Rivka Miriam, *Chairs in the Desert*, p. 8.

35 Shlonsky, *Poems*, vol. 1, pp. 293-294

— but the miracle took place:/ I happened to meet a pursued deer — and his two horns were fire./ I saw a lily in a burning darkness,/ and golden thorns were sheltering it: a secret!” Further, it becomes clear that the pursued deer is the poet himself, who has overcome his “shame” and now takes pleasure in his exile from society: “For I am happy here with silence and with swirl/ to be like a pursued deer among the mountains.” The poet experiences a comforting unity with God: “And light illuminated over me. My God is like a peaceful sea.” In the third poem, the sacredness distances and is being covered again with doubts, but it leaves behind a feeling of secrecy, which shelters the poet like a red canopy. The readiness for a mystical experience raises feelings of guilt and anxiety in the poet, not because he is afraid of the meeting with God, but because he lives in a culture which views mysticism as an enemy and denounces it. When he lets himself to be drawn to the experience he understands that this is an act of *meri* (revolt, disobedience, mutiny), which fills him with a sudden joy: “Then my heart sings: revolt, you are my pleasure.” Revolutionary revolt was an important value in Shlonsky’s world, so when the poet realizes that his mystical yearnings are, in fact, a revolt, he becomes free of his guilt.

Ezra Zoussman (1900-1972), Shlonsky’s contemporary and a member of his literary circle, was born in Odessa to a family composed of *masskilim*. He took part in revolutionary activities, was arrested, and made *aliya* in 1922. He began his literary activity by writing poetry in Russian, and only later switched to Hebrew. Although his childhood and education was not Hassidic — his knowledge of Hassidism was a result of self-study — in his poetry he, like Shlonsky, expressed the tension between his attraction to mysticism and the socialist ideological norms. In his poem “The Secret Point,”³⁶ Zoussman described a mystical experience which occurs *bevat-ayin* (very quickly, an expression which mingles together *bevat-akhat* and *keheref-ayin*, thus implying an experience of unity), which revitalizes and revives the poet’s soul. The “Point” in the title of the poem is the “Inner Point,” which is often mentioned by Rabbi Shneiur Zalman of Liadi in his *Tania* (1796), the central book of HABAD, where the “point” is the place of the soul’s meeting with God. Zoussman’s poem opens with a description of such a situation of unity,

36 Zoussman, *Poems*, p. 355.

when the “point” “receives light from the seven heavens,” namely, from the world of God. The soul receives the upper light, the *or haganuz* (the hidden light), and becomes one with the royal world, which transforms the soul into a diamond in a crown. It is a feeling of paradoxical unity of contrasts, including the contrasts between the generations: the point “unites the [different] times by the order of the circle” and “becomes one with the fathers’ secret.” It cancels the contrasting directions and ways of Judaism: “All the wheres and from wheres were cancelled on behalf of Shabbat.” The hidden light “was sown on the space of the lower grades,” thus the contrast between what is up and what is down is also cancelled. The poem is replete with Hassidic expressions, although the poet declares that he “prays without pronouncing the name of God,” namely, without being religious in the conventional way. The mystical experience is for him “a freedom from all the governing orders.” The poem ends with referring to the mystical experience of the poet as a *mitzvah ha-ba’ah ba-aveira* — a religious deed achieved through sin. The poem was written in the period of the British Mandate, when there was not yet an Israeli government, so the “governing orders” could not be political. Zoussman likely had in mind the ideological stress of the leftist party he belonged to, or the general atmosphere of agreement with the communist line, which aggressively rejected any contact with religion.

Political ideology was not the only hindrance on the poets’ way to sacredness. When Israeli poets complained about the obstacles which hindered their contact with sacredness, they often mentioned the hedonist modern secular life as an impossible background of the way to God. Zelda (1914-1984), a religious poet of a famous HABADic family, wrote: “How can the Shabbat plant/ the blossom of angels/ in a heart of mad and unruly flesh?”³⁷ This idea appears in poems of secular young poets as well. Yair Hurvitz in his poem “One More Word” mourns: “We are aberrant from the great vane of spirit,/ we have fixed a meeting. From the café / to the movie, we are aberrant from the great vane of spirit and the voices.”³⁸ “The vane of the spirit” is Hurvitz’s original symbol of sacredness, reminiscent of traditional symbols, such as the multicolored

37 Zelda, *Poems*, p. 27.

38 Hurvitz, *The Fate of the Garden*, p. 199.

arch or the multi-leaf round rose. In his poem “A Legend”³⁹ Hurvitz described his generation’s indifference to the possibilities of contact with secret worlds, and in his long poem “When Close to Wonder We Better Know” he lamented the loss of such a contact. In the latter poem, Hurvitz described the people of his generation as slaves who are seeking a master, devoting themselves to pleasures and desires, but who, even when satiated, are still hungry, looking for a treasure unknown to themselves, alienated from their own secret inner selves. They cover themselves with animal furs, because they feel poor and sad, without mystery and without a soul, but this cover only intensifies their sadness and depression.

Ilan Sheinfeld (born in 1960), one of the first openly homosexual poets in Israel, a public relations manager in Tel-Aviv, opens his cycle of poems “The Voyage to Livnat Ha-Sapir [the white-pure sapphire, mentioned in Exodus 24:10 as the material which lies under God]”⁴⁰ with a description of his generation’s desperate spiritual situation: they have long been disconnected from the dimension of purity and sacredness, therefore they cannot find joy in their personal lives. “Wandering in the world, everyone with his falsehood, with his rescue,/with his reflections, looking/ for the precious stone which/ will blaze and purify him/ from all the reflections of death/ floating in dreams, we find neither the white-pure sapphire/nor the comforts of onyx (...) And we, deserted between debauchery and asceticism,/ rub our backs with our bellies, as if/ we were futureless.” Gavriella Elisha in her poem “My Parcel of Sky”⁴¹ wrote that the way to sacredness is now blocked with garbage, but the religious way also does not lead anywhere: “The way which leads to was blocked by heaps of garbage/ and the way which used to lead does not lead any more.”

Such doubts of the possibility of contact with Jewish sacredness in the modern world and laments about the disconnection from sacredness contribute to the authenticity and emotional power of the poetic description. They make clear that the poet describes very powerful experiences, which are generally rejected by the culture in which he lives.

39 Ibid., p. 31.

40 Sheinfeld, *Tashlikh*, pp. 92-119

41 Elisha, *The Book of Dreams*, p. 13.

Various Degrees of Intimate Unity

In contrast to poems which doubt the possibility of mystical unity, many others do describe the realization of contact with sacredness, unto a complete canceling of the borders between the human and the divine. Jewish theological writings since the Middle Ages tend to describe God as completely different from human beings — as abstract, perfect, beyond the reach of human thought. However, anthropomorphic descriptions of God — both physical and emotional — can be found in the Bible and in the Talmud. Ancient Jewish mysticism described the upper world as *Adam Kadmon*, primeval man, whose limbs form the divine spheres. The anthropomorphic concept of God — in contrast to the concept of God as an abstract being — emphasizes the similarity between man and God and raises the possibility of their contact. The characteristic Jewish mystical view of the upper world as graded emphasizes the difficulty involved in reaching unity and the effort that should be invested in it.

In contrast to this distance, many Hebrew poets describe full intimate contact with God. For example, in Pinhas Sadeh's poem "The Way Rising to the Landscapes of Wine," the contact with God is perceived as a simultaneous absorption of light and music: "Then the singing of God is spreading among the soul's walls to light them like candles,/ and even the walls of the wine-shop are singing, for the beams of our house are violins."⁴²

The theological problem of *dveikut* — mystical unity in spite of the transcendence of God — does not exist in the secular context. It is no wonder then that the process of unification with God is generally described as an immediate mingling, bringing to full intimacy and unity. The intimacy, however, is of different degrees.

As mentioned above, secular poets sometimes describe sacredness as Nothingness, unity with which demands disembodiment or even death (see ch. 4), or as a paradoxical being which cannot be grasped by the human mind. In one of Amir Gilboa's poems, which bears the strange title *Bekitso Li-Mereishito* (perhaps: In His End From His Beginning)⁴³, sacredness cancels not only

⁴² Ibid., p. 57.

⁴³ Gilboa, *Poems*, vol. 2 p. 176.

time and space, but also the importance of any terrestrial facts. Unity with sacredness as an experience of paradox is characteristic of Alterman's poetry. In many of his poems a paradoxical unity of contrasts is hiding in the depths of Being, characterizing its secret essence. This is one of the reasons for the mystical impression which Alterman's poetry can make on a reader who is sensitive to mystical traditions. Alterman's paradoxical conception of reality enables him to present it both from a disillusioned point of view, as cruel and grotesque, and from a mystical point of view, as a divine redemptive being. For example, in his poem "The Nakedness of Fire" the earth is depicted as cruel and estranged, but from this indifferent cruelty, from hell itself, purity and redemption are shining: "and like unshakable eternity, in sleepy cruelty,/ a hell of light and azure shines."⁴⁴ The presentation of sacredness as a paradoxical being and as Nothing is central to the poetry of Israel Eliraz (born in 1936). Eliraz's philosophical, enigmatic poetry is absorbed with secular mystical elements, sometimes alluding to German Romanticism. In one of his poems Eliraz described the passage of the soul to divine spheres using an image of a bird "passing from *klum le-i-klum* (from Nothing to no-Nothing), moving up and down from her being/ to her disappearance."⁴⁵

In the Zohar and in other Jewish mystical sources, complete unity with God is symbolically described as drowning in water or in light.⁴⁶ The same images appear in Bialik's long poem "Zohar (Brilliance)" (1901), in which a child, together with a group of imaginary legendary *tsafirim* (light winds, zephyrs), dives into and drowns in the water of the lake, whose movements are reflecting the sunlight. This situation is described in the poem as a cosmic unity, including the unity between water and light. The water of the lake is described as "Water of gold and brilliance and wonder/ fragments of sunlight and a surface of sun-glow/ scales of pure gold and chains of light spots/ splinters of two suns." The upper light is here shattered into pieces, and while mingling with the water it transforms water into light. It is a meeting between two suns — the upper and the lower — which in shattering together return the world into a primeval chaos

44 Alterman, *Poems From Long Ago*, p. 103.

45 Eliraz, *Clementa Miniatures*, p. 31.

46 Idel, *New Perspectives*, p. 87; Helner, *A River*, pp. 280-367.

of water and light: “Underneath cosmos, sweeping and drowning in chaos/ in a deluge of brilliance and oceans of light.” Paradoxically, and in contrast to the Biblical story of creation, in which God’s sacred light appears after chaos was overcome, here chaos is sacredness itself, into which the poet is absorbed: “And in this *yam di-nur* (sea of fire) and in this maelstrom of brilliance/ I also was diving, absorbing the ocean of lights.” The intermixture is mutual: the child is both diving in the ocean of light and absorbs it in himself.

Like the child in Bialik’s “Zohar” the poet in Dalia Rabikovitch’s poems, “Spots of Light” and “Delight”⁴⁷ is ecstatically swallowed by light. In “Delight” the poet both swallows and is being swallowed by the sources of sacredness — water and light. In “Spots of Light” the traditional image of the mystic drowning in the divine sphere is reversed: it is the light which is drowned in and swallowed by the creative matter, so that it is not clear which is superior to which: “And in this dark matter spots of light drown”; “and the darkness transforms its body to be a well for the spots of light.” Dalia Rabikovitch (1936-2005) was born in Ramat-Gan, grew up in a *kibbutz*, and lived most of her life in Tel-Aviv, socially close to Nathan Zach’s circle. Her acquaintance with traditional Judaism was perhaps a result of her special relationship with Baruch Kurzweil, who was her teacher in high school, and later of her short marriage to Yosef Bar-Yosef, whose father, the writer Yehoshua Bar-Yosef, wrote novels and stories about mystics in Tsfat, and who himself studied Kabbalah in Hebrew University.

In Rivka Miriam’s poem “Let Me Lick the Sky”⁴⁸ the poet licks and swallows heaven, which is reflected in swamps: “Let me lick the sky/ which has run away from the swamps.” Rivka Miriam here transfers the swallowing from God to herself, comparing herself, at the time when she feels the presence of God, to an animal that licks a wet swamp creature which has for a moment emerged from his dwelling. In her poem “The God of the Pears”⁴⁹ the eating of the pears makes the “eaten” human being conscious of his Godly image; it also makes God conscious of his closeness to humanity. The relations between the human mystic and God are completely symmetrical.

47 Rabikovitch, *Poems*, pp. 44, 47.

48 Rivka Miriam, *I Drowned in the Windows*, p. 34.

49 Rivka Miriam, *From the Stone’s Mothers Songs*, p. 30.

Godmanhood

In traditional mysticism, the superiority of God over man is self-understandable, while unity is a daring idea which supplies man with divinity for a short time, but by no means cancels his inferiority in comparison to God. Traditional mystical unity is not a reciprocal situation: the mystic receives the divine abundance, he suckles from God, God covers him with his protecting light, but not vice versa. In modern Hebrew poetry, however, the relationships between man and God are sometimes described in a much more daring images, of mutuality or even of inversion of roles. Man himself becomes a source of sacredness. In modern mystical experience, the greatness of God is diminished, while man receives mythological dimensions. The possible intimacy between the mystic and God or the possibility that man could influence God — these ideas had already been developed in Kabbalah and Hassidism. In Lurianic Kabbalah they were reflected in the term “*Tikkun*” and in the myth of man’s raising the sparkles of sacredness. These daring ideas and images were stretched to even greater extremes by modern Hebrew poets.

Here we sometimes find descriptions of mystical unity through which God is absorbed by and in the poet’s body, making him a God-like creature. In Bialik’s “Zohar” the child feels that he himself becomes one of the sparkling heavenly zephyrs. In Dalia Rabikovitch’s autobiographical poem “The Blue Lizard in the Sun”⁵⁰ a poor lizard, blue of cold and loneliness, is being transformed into a colorful, happy creature of cosmic dimensions and mythological powers while she becomes one with the redeeming sun. The title of Yair Hurvitz’s poem, *Or Hadadi* (reciprocal/ mutual light),⁵¹ concisely formulates the equality between man and God as sources of sacredness.

In Bialik’s “Alone” the poet feels that he grew too big for the mother-like divine *Shekhina*. She can no longer protect him, because her wing is broken. While he feels their unity — she speaks from his mouth — it is she who implores him to help, not vice versa. In Bialik’s “My Light Was Not Unearned” the poet himself is the source of the sacred, redeeming sparkle. In Alterman’s

50 Rabikovitch, *Poems*, p. 48.

51 Yair Hurvitz, *The Fate of the Garden*, p. 109.

poetry sacredness symbolically appears as a mythical feminine image, whom the poet calls “my wife” or even “my daughter,” feeling responsible for consoling her in her suffering. He even turns to her with commands and directions, such as “You, be his [the heart’s] nurse”; “turn the light!” “Do not come now. A dead child [lies] in my lap.”⁵² In Ben Yitzhak’s poem “Kingdom”⁵³ the poet is a divine king who dwells in a marble palace and wears a royal mantle with hems (alluding to “And His hem are filling the Palace,” Isaiah 6:1), while the feminine divinity is his wife-slave, whom he orders “Sit at my feet on the whiteness of the marble (...) sit quiet/ until I say get up and sing.”

Rivka Miriam’s poems are a very interesting case of descriptions of symbolic mystical unity, where the traditional roles of man and God are daringly, sometimes humorously, reversed. In her poem “And Suddenly”⁵⁴ she described a process by which her body gradually disappears, and only a pair of arms-wings remains. She takes the place of God, who has disappeared, becoming an angelic God-like figure herself. In her poem “My Hems are Filling” the poet — like Ben-Yitzhak in his “Kingdom” — alludes to Isaiah 6:1 (see above), in order to characterize her own God-like feeling: “My hems are filling the palace./ Whoever regards my hem is going to die,/ for the palace has died in His desire/ and his death from my hems is bursting and flowing.” Here the poet takes God’s place and sits on his chair. Her ruling divinity is absolute. She is a negative God, she is death, so whoever comes into contact with her should die. In her poem “And a Man Struggled with Me” she wrote: “When I say his name I say my name.”⁵⁵ Rivka Miriam described very intimate relationships between her and God, where the difference between her and Him is lost: “And I told God about heaven/ which I do not know if it still exists, and where,/ that maybe they are wrapped in me and maybe I am wrapped in it.”⁵⁶ In her poem “By My God” the poet enters a place from which God has escaped, so she can carry out His mission. It is not she who lost Him, but He has lost her. “I sat alone by my God/ who in the great spaces has lost me/ like a piece of

52 Alterman, *Poems from Long Ago*, pp. 15, 73.

53 Ben-Yitzhak, *Poems*, p. 15.

54 Rivka Miriam, *Chairs in the Desert*, p. 28.

55 Rivka Miriam, *And The Jew Rested*, p. 75.

56 Rivka Miriam, *I Drowned in the Windows*, p. 77.

sky/ and did not come to look for me.”⁵⁷ In her poem “One” she described God as “dispersed and separated,” “agitated and scared,” becoming One only with “our” help.⁵⁸

Two of Gavriella Elisha’s poems, written in the style of Middle Ages Jewish mystical diaries, are excerpts from God’s diary, where He confesses His dreams and other personal experiences, including His meeting with the poet, whose role is to console and heal Him.⁵⁹ Elisha described the creation of the world as God’s own mystical experience, told by Him in the first singular, from His point of view: “In the complete darkness which fell/ I began to inseminate light islands of light/ and then I sowed life and I sowed the separateness of the created being/ and his yearnings to return to the complete darkness.” According to this poem, after creating the world God spent most of His time in sleep and dreams: “a sharp sound bothers my sleep/ and I wish to dream more about syzygy/ which will return me to my paradise nothingness/ the happiness of things which are not.”

Binyamin Shvili in his poem “Creation”⁶⁰ described himself as God, who created the world in a mythological dialectical chain process, through which he himself, air, wind, fire and earth created each other, and at the end of this process the poet created love. In his poem “On Your Bed, O God”⁶¹ the poet turns to God and tells him to look at the body and the desires of human beings in order to see Himself. Reversing the traditional symbolism, Shvili described God as yearning for sexual contact with human beings: “When you will touch your face with your legs God what will you hear [?]/ Us burning our senses our voice burning/ God when You will caress Your naked body at night/ on Your bed alone what will be for we storm/ Your desire for Your body God.” These might sound like terribly insolent words, but they are a development of the mythical kernels of the traditional Jewish mystical experience, which was often described as a semi-physical contact of man with God.

57 Rivka Miriam, *A Tree Touched A Tree*, p. 23

58 Rivka Miriam, *From the Stone Mothers’ Songs*, p. 50.

59 Gavriella Elisha, “In the Book of the Dreams of God.” “Waiting for your coming,” *The Book of Dreams*, pp. 28, 32.

60 Shvili, *Poems of Nostalgia to Mecca*, p. 64.

61 Shvili, *Poems of the Great Tourist*, p. 118.

Mystical modern Hebrew literature, like modern mystical thinking in general, tends to emphasize the humanity and the concreteness of the divinity. In Bialik's "Zohar" the zephyrs are presented as part of a series of the child's terrestrial friends, including broken instruments, such as "the plummet of a broken clock and a saw gnashing its tooth in the thickness of a beam." The everyday terrestrial reality which surrounds the child is absorbed with mystery and with elements of sacredness: "A shining lattice with a modest moon's face," "Every golden ray is stretched to my eye, bending from the sun, from a candle, or from splinters of crystal glass." Bialik brought to extremity the Hasidic idea of the unlimited immanence of God, so that the contact with Him is described in his poem as everyday intimate relationships.

The lowering of God and His equation with everyday experiences are even more prominent in Israeli contemporary poetry. Rivka Miriam in her poem "Alone"⁶² described herself as sitting with God on a bench and telling Him about her intimate matters. In Admiel Kosman's (born in 1957) poem "Something is Hurting"⁶³ the poet turns to God by calling him "koni" (my buyer or possessor, alluding to *koneh shamayim ve-arets*, "the buyer/possessor of heaven and earth," (Genesis 14: 19, 22), a metaphor which stresses God's ownership of and responsibility for man. The poet complains to Him about his physical pains, the way a small child complains to his parent: "Something is hurting me here, on the side, do you see, my buyer?" In this context, which emphasizes the humanity of God, man creates God and activates Him. Admiel Kosman is an Israeli-born non-conventional religious person and a professor of Talmud, now living in Germany.

Pinhas Sadeh's poem "The Way to the Landscapes of Wine"⁶⁴ ends with a metaphor which compares the poet to a clapper tongue of the divine bell, without which the bell is mute. Rivka Miriam formulated this idea in the sharpest way: "God (...) which I have created and I kill Him (...) I call Him in many names/ and he calls me in many names."⁶⁵ In her poem "The God

62 Rivka Miriam, *I Drowned in the Windows*, p. 79.

63 Kosman, *What I Can*, p. 11.

64 Sadeh, *Poems*, p. 57.

65 Rivka Miriam, *The Voices Toward Them*, p. 44.

of Pears”⁶⁶ God descends and swallows the creatures which he has created in His image in order to build His own sacredness. Such expressions shed light on the sacred value of terrestrial human being in modern thought. They transmit a view which transfers the source of sacredness from God to man, and conceives the mystical experience as a psychological, not an ontological, event.

Even the religious poets Zelda and Miron Izakson (born in 1956) described the meeting with God as a subjective inner event, which creates sacredness out of a personal inner change. In her poem “Shabbat and Everyday” Zelda described an ecstatic meeting with God in a vegetable shop, where she was suspected of theft. The shock of offence made her feel as if she was “drowning in darkness.” She was redeemed when she heard the voice of God and felt that “The King of honor is abiding with me in the turbid shop.” Her ability to overcome the offence brought about an apparition of the divine world: “I almost kissed the shopkeeper –/ for behind his anxious back/ the landscape of shining freedom was revealed/ freedom of the Shabbat lands/ burning in the songs of *benei heikhala* (Aramaic: the dwellers of the [divine] palace).”⁶⁷ Zelda identified her feeling of inner freedom, which she has succeeded to raise in herself, with the heavenly world, where angels are singing praises to God.

Miron Izakson in his poem “No I” wrote about the existential identity between him and God as an inevitable basis for his belief, both in God and in himself: “If there is nothing in me, if there is no possession in me/ You too are absent, I cannot/ otherwise and there is no You. (...) Without asking permission, with no intention,/ I cannot otherwise, if there is nothing in me/ there is nothing in you as well.”⁶⁸ In his poem “One Should Meet”⁶⁹ Izakson also reversed the roles of Man and God, referring to God as someone who obstinately insists on meeting the poet: “You are obstinate when You come to me,/ You want nothing/ but that I shall be mysterious in your ears.” The mystery — a quality of God — is here attributed to the poet, who is supposed to make an impression on God.

66 Rivka Miriam, *The Stone Mothers' Songs*, p. 30.

67 Zelda, *Poems*, p. 31.

68 Izakson, *Poems*, p. 64.

69 Izakson, *I Ran Away And Was Like*, p. 70.

In traditional mysticism — both Jewish and Christian — the intimacy of unity with God is symbolized by anthropomorphic familial and erotic relationships.⁷⁰ Such metaphors and symbols for the intimate relationship with God can also be found in modern Hebrew poetry, in a more daring way.

Here sometimes the mystical experience might seem to be a metaphor for the poet's powerful relationships with parents or with a non-religious value which is sacred to the poet. Thus Bialik in his "Alone" depicted the *Shekhina* as a beloved mother, whose suffering and helplessness place stress on her son. The Jewish symbol of the *Shekhina* and the metaphor of the mother represent the spirit of Judaism, which for Bialik was a sacred value. In Dalia Rabikovitich's poem "The Median Column,"⁷¹ the whole being is leaning on the dead father's soul, as if his being is the basis on which the whole world and life are standing. The dead father's soul becomes here an immanent God, the source of all the living souls. God and her father are one and the same. In Yair Hurvitz's poem "Filling the Blanks,"⁷² the poet's dead father is a heavenly divine light which lights the child's inner being. Do these poems deal with the painful memory of the father or with mystical experiences? Poets whose world is far from mysticism do not use mystical images.

It is also noteworthy that mystical unity is sometimes described as a return to the national Jewish past through contact with family memories. This theme is prominent in the poetry of Itamar Yazo-Kest and Yosef Ozer, Israeli poets who became religious (*khazru bi-tshuva*). One of Hava Pinhas-Cohen's "Home Poems," in which she described her grandmother's kitchen on Shabbat eve, ends with the words "I need the memory of three generations/ in order to believe that He was known -/ in the inner smells of the house/ You are./ Amen."⁷³

As in traditional mysticism, in modern Hebrew poetry erotic relationships are the most common symbolism for the intimacy with divine sacredness (see ch. 6). Generally speaking, in modern Hebrew literature one can find more

70 On the erotic character of the Christian mystical experience see Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin*. On Feminine Divinity in Christian and Jewish mysticism see Green, *The Shekhina*; Idel, "Sexual Metaphors"; Gellman, *Mystical Experience*, pp. 102-131.

71 Rabikovitich, *Poems*, pp. 9-10.

72 Hurvitz, *The Fate of the Garden*, p. 173.

73 Pinhas-Cohen, *Home Poems*.

mystical symbols and metaphors of erotic experiences than erotic symbols and metaphors of unity with God. This impression depends on interpretation, for sometimes it is difficult to say what is the thematic center of the poem — the erotic experience or the yearnings for contact with a sacred being. An example of this problem is Pinhas Sadeh's poem "Light." The poem begins with a description of an erotic dream in which the poet's beloved woman lies in his lap "like a being of light, white beauty which cannot be described in words." In the dream they are strolling, and he speaks with her "about the earth./ Sacred earth, sacred beauty, light." When the poet awakes he realizes that "I was left actually with nothing."⁷⁴ On the one hand, the poem can be understood as a description of an erotic dream, in which mystical metaphors and symbols function just as a means of emotional intensification; on the other hand, the word "nothing" (*ayin*), which ends the poem, is a mystical name for God, so the poems can also be understood as describing the poet's way to God through an erotic dream.

As in traditional mysticism, in modern Hebrew poetry the erotic intimacy between man and God is of different degrees: it can be depicted as an embrace, a kiss, a marriage, or a sexual relationship. The romantic relationship between a knight and his lady is a metaphor for the poet's worship of sacredness in Bialik's long poem "The Lake," in Ben-Yitzhak's poems "Kingdom," and in Alterman's cycle of poems *Stars Outside*. Amir Gilboa in his "Just As I Am Walking" compared himself to a bridegroom who goes to meet his bride. In his poem "Birth" (see ch. 1) the poet is the bride, while God is the bridegroom. Aryeh Ludwig Strauss (1892-1953) who came to Israel from Germany in 1934 and supported socialist Zionism, wrote with a rare mixture of delicacy and sensuality, "For you opened your eye, and pure azure flooded me/ with it desire will be consumed like a wood in fire."⁷⁵ Binyamin Shvili in his poem "You Are All Vessels"⁷⁶ described physical relationships where the body is both disgustingly unclean and a source of sacredness: "You are all vessels and dirt and menstruations and garbage and amnion water/ and spots and holes and

74 Sadeh, *I Sing Like a Bird*, p. 6.

75 Strauss, *Hours and Generation*, p. 46.

76 Shvili, *Poems of the Great Tourist*, p. 109.

broken dishes/ to worlds of love and being and essence and noble emanation.” In many of Haya Esther’s poems (born in 1941, religious background) the mystical description of sexual relationships is extremely daring. In her poem “Love Poem” she wrote “Joy of my life/ thousands of eyes rich with soul in my flesh I hear the God in me breathing (...) your pole in my lungs/ your semen in my sips/ flowing in my fluids/ trembling the openings of sacredness,/straddles the saliva of desire.”⁷⁷ Gavriella Elisha, Ilan Sheinfeld and Binyamin Shvili compared mystical unity to lesbian and homosexual relationships.

The qualities of God or of sacredness in this poetry are, of course, very different from the qualities which are attributed to God in traditional mysticism. It is not only a more human God, and in this sense, a lower one, and not only a more concrete being, but also sometimes a fragmented being. This is clear in Bialik’s “Zohar,” in which heavenly sacredness comes down in the image of a group of shining zephyrs, sparkles of light, who play like small children. Such a symbol of sacredness could not have been created without the influence of Romantic poetry, where childhood and nature are sacred, but it also continues the Jewish traditions of mystical unity as a group experience (see ch. 5).

Up and Down Movements Toward Unity

In traditional mysticism the blurring of the border between the divine and the human spheres is pictured as a movement which unites man, whose natural place is below, with God, who abides above, in heaven. Unity can be achieved by either a descent of God or by an ascent of man.⁷⁸ For example, the Jewish ancient mystical image of “mounting with the chariot” (euphemistically called *yerida ba-merkava*, descending with the chariot) presupposes an ascension, while the Kabbalist (and neo-Platonic) idea of *shefa* (abundance) presupposes a descent of sacredness from God down to man.

In modern Hebrew poetry the sacredness is generally descending, maybe because the secular mystical experience is not conceived of as a religious activity which demands a spiritual, intellectual or moral effort, but as a situation

77 Esther, *Speaking God is my Flesh*, p. 19.

78 Idel, “Universalization and Integration.”

of relaxation and delight. In Gilboa's poem "Great are the Deeds of My God," where joy is a divine apparition, the poet wrote "Here it is coming, my joy, here it is coming down on me."⁷⁹ In Pinhas Sadeh's poem "The Way to the Landscapes of Wine," God comes down on the poet like a burning golden bell, in which the poet is like a laughing clapper tongue.⁸⁰ Rivka Miriam in her poem "The Signs"⁸¹ described how the signs of God fall down from the sky and stick to human beings because of the similarity between the human and divine chasms.

Light is a common image of descending sacredness, for the natural sources of light are in the sky. In this context the contact and unification are described as a descent of light which fills the poet and turns him to be lighted himself and to give light, thus becoming an inseparable part of the heavenly light. Such descriptions of light which descends from above and fills the poet can be found in Bilaik's "Zohar," in Uri Zvi Greenberg's *Hizdaharut* (which refers to something becoming filled with *zohar*, sacred brilliance)⁸² and in Dalia Rabikovitch's poems "Spots of Light," "Delight" and "The Blue Lizard in the Sun."⁸³

The image of water mixing with light enables the poet to mingle up and down movements: the light comes from above and it reflects in the water, thus creating a movement of a cosmic circle. Such an image appears in the poem "The Wondering of my Blood," written by Yokheved Bat-Miriam (1901-1980, born in Russia, not religious).⁸⁴ The poet sees God as a shadow which "falls down in the space — this is You," then she sees "the image of mountains and tops of trees walking in heaven," and then a big river streaming into "the shores of my narrow *yamai* (seas/ days)," and she asks: "Is the image reflected from the depths of these waters Yours or mine?"

The traditional symbolic mixture of light and water as a symbol for the feeling of mystical unity can be found in the poems of the religious poets Haviva Pedaia (born in 1965, a descendent of a Kabbalist Rabbi from Iraq,

79 Gilboa, *Poems*, vol. 1 p. 198.

80 Sadeh, *Poems*, p. 57.

81 Rivka Miriam, *The East was Near By*, p. 35.

82 Greenberg, *Poems*, vol. 1 p. 85.

83 Rabikovitch, *Poems*, pp. 44, 47, 48.

84 Bat-Miriam, *Poems*, p. 74.

religious, a professor of Jewish mysticism in Ben-Gurion University) and Yosef Zvi Rimmon. Pedaia, in her poem “I Remembered Nights from Long Ago,” wrote: “Your halo streamed through me”⁸⁵ and Rimmon in his poem “I Knew No Tear” wrote “God is on me walls of garden’s trees washed in night lights.”⁸⁶ Light also has a central role in the apparition of sacredness in Amir Gilboa’s cycle of poems “The Begetters of Light.”⁸⁷

The symbol of the bird is an expected symbol in poems which describe mystical unity as an ascending movement. In Pedaia’s poem “I Am a Dove”⁸⁸ the dove flies from the ark not in order to find rest on earth, but in order to reach the heavenly light. This traditional symbol receives an original development in Yair Hurvitz’s poem “On Your Hear, Open,” where the poet is “ascending [to sacredness] on the steps of water/ like a bird”⁸⁹ — an imaginary image of steps made of water, in which a bird is walking up toward God. In another poem Hurvitz described himself as a crumb of dust which rises to the sky, trying to free itself from the wave of turbidity which he mistook for his home.⁹⁰ In contrast to the royal walk of the bird on the steps of water, the image of the dust crumb emphasizes man’s insignificance and the miracle of his ascent to heaven.

In Alterman’s “To the Elephants” a child mounts to the sky, where he is to take part in the circus-like divine game which the clouds play. In Rivka Miriam’s “Roofs”⁹¹ the people who receive sacredness stand on the roofs which stand on the tops of the mountains, and the mountains stand on the top of the years, the months, the weeks and the days which have not yet been created — mixing time and space. In these poems the ascent is described not as an effort of danger (which was the case in Bialik’s “He Peeped and Died”), but as a feeling of inner freedom.

85 Pedaia, *The Origin of the Soul*, p. 28.

86 Rimmon, *Crowns*, p. 130.

87 Gilboa, *Poems*, vol. 1 pp. 184-189.

88 Pedaia, *The Origin of the Soul*, p. 43.

89 Hurvitz, *The Fate of the Garden*, p. 75.

90 *Ibid.*, p. 133.

91 Rivka Miriam, *And the Jew is Resting*, p. 42.

The conventional image according to which God is above and man is below is here sometimes reversed: Bilaik in “The Lake” described the flowing of the divine abundance from below, and the poet in Aryeh Ludwig Strauss’ poem “From the Depths” achieves unity with God, who dwells in the depths, while he is singing and drowning together with Him: “With You I shall go deep into my destructions.”⁹² Amir Gilboa in his “The Lost Noon Script” compared the passage from profanity to sacredness to a jump from a high mountain, “from which it is possible to jump unto the end of things.”⁹³ Alterman in his poem “A Sudden Day” described a meeting with sacredness which erases the difference between up and down: “Not the feast here took off, not the dove’s tiding/ but the windows set ablaze toward us,/ but the sky like a white goat/ mounted to eat up the hay of our roofs.”⁹⁴ The sky (or heaven) here is so low that it has to mount in order to reach the roofs, like a goat who mounts a low house, whose roof is made of hay (perhaps Alterman had in mind the poor houses in the *shtetl*). Later in the poem the roofs do not keep their permanent place, but “mount on the chest of the walls.” The speaker in this poem is a child who watches a cosmic circus while he is sitting on the shoulders of a giant father. Thus his dimensions are mythological: “The market has put me on his giant shoulder –/ My God, glorious is your unruly city,/ let her [the city] come to me to the arena [of the circus]!” The call “My God!” appears here after the child becomes conscious of his own mythological dimensions.

The achievement of sacredness is sometimes imagined as a way, a horizontal passage from the everyday world to a mysterious, more beautiful world. Alterman in his poem “An Endless Meeting”⁹⁵ described sacredness as a castle which the wanderer wishes to reach and in which he wants to be accepted. In Zelda’s “Every Rose” the divine world is an island located beyond a sea of fire. Avraham Halfi in an untitled poem described mystical unification as if he was streaming into the jaws of God. The horizontal unachievable distance to God is paradoxically eliminated in Binyamin Shvili’s untitled poem: “Go wherever you go my Elouvi [a neologism compounded of *Elohim*=God and

92 Strauss, *Hours and Generation*, p. 74.

93 Gilboa, *Poems*, vol.1, p. 249.

94 Alterman, *Poems from Long Ago*, p. 17.

95 *Ibid.*, p. 8.

ahuvi= my beloved] / I shall pursue you/ like a wandering star in your belly.”⁹⁶ Rivka Miriam in her poem “In the Place I Was”⁹⁷ described the contact with sacredness as going hand in hand with “The Place” (God) who gave her his hand. The distance and the way are not cancelled, but God abides with the poet all through the way to Him.

The Goals of *Dveikut*

In traditional Jewish mysticism unity can be achieved in a variety of ways, and the goal has various names and degrees of sacredness, but it is always one: God. Such an agreement about the sacred goal does not exist in modern Hebrew literature. In Modern Hebrew literature there is a variety of goals of mystical unity, among which God is not the only one. The sacred goal here is connected with ideas which have absolute values in modern culture. For example, the poet in Alterman’s poem “Storm On the Threshold” turns to the personified symbol of sacredness and says: “Be for me a synonym in spirit and in song/ to everything of unrecovered glory and beauty.”⁹⁸ For Alterman glory and beauty in life and in poetry have absolute, irreducible value, and therefore they are sacred.

In the non-religious context the sacredness of different values can clash and create a conflict — a situation which in a Jewish religious context is impossible. For example, in Bialik’s poetry there is a constant tension between the sacredness of the Jewish spirit, on the one hand, and the sacredness of Romantic individual values — nature, childhood, love, and poetic creativity, on the other. As mentioned above, in his poem “Alone” the Jewish spirit is symbolized by the *Shekhina*, and is thus treated as a sacred being. In others of Bialik’s poems — “Zohar” and “The Lake,” for example — childhood and nature are sacred. Love is a sacred being in Bialik’s “Come Out,” “Daughter of Israel” and “If the Angel Asks.” The conflict between clashing kinds of sacredness is the thematic center of Bialik’s long poem “The Scroll of Fire.”

96 Shvili. *Songs of the Great Tourist*, p. 51.

97 Rivka Miriam, *Nearby Was the East*, p. 5.

98 Alterman, *Poems from Long Ago*, p. 82.

Conflicts between values considered sacred in the contexts of Zionist ideology and values considered sacred in the context of modern European literature also appear in the poetry Avraham Shlonsky and Nathan Alterman. For example, in Shlonsky's poem "Captivity"⁹⁹ the yearning for mystical sacredness is experienced as a betrayal of socialist sacred values. In the opening poem of Alterman's cycle of poems "Stars Outside" the poet expresses his guilt for deserting "the sheep and the *ayelet* (doe/morning star)" after caressing them for the sake of worshipping "a green grove and a laughing woman and the rainy lashes of a tree top."¹⁰⁰ The sheep and the *ayelet* symbolize the Jewish spirit, which Alterman sees as sacrificial and motherly, but always sad and suffering, while the laughing grove (the word in Hebrew is the feminine *hursha*), the woman and the tree-top (*tsameret*, also a feminine word) have the sacredness of joy and vitality. The conflict between these two kinds of sacredness is very clear in Alterman's play "The Ghost Inn" (1962), where the difficulty of choosing between two women, one of them the hero's deserted wife and the second the hostess of the inn, symbolize the inner dilemma of the hero, who has to choose between loyalty to his social duties and to his mission as an artist. Both are depicted as religious missions for which the artist should sacrifice his life.

Hassidism cultivated the idea that bodily delights — eating, drinking, smoking — can be a way, and even a condition, for the spiritual worship of God. Hassidism also developed the Kabbalistic idea of *avoda be-gashmiut* (worshipping God by means of down-to-earth bodily activities).¹⁰¹ Such Hassidic ideas, with which Hassidism had built a bridge between Judaism and the modern world, fascinated Hebrew prose writers of Neo-Hassidic literature at the turn of the 20th century (see ch.2).¹⁰²

These ideas are the basis for the description of the full intimate mystical unity of the child in Bialik's "Zohar," where spontaneous, sensual, bodily perceptions of nature are described as a unity with the sacred essence of all being. In the eyes of the child, the zephyrs and the sparks of light are divine creatures, angels of light. Their role here is similar to the role of divine images in mystical

99 Shlonsky, *Poems*, vol. 1 p. 293.

100 Alterman, *Poems From Long Ago*, p. 7.

101 Elior, "Rabbi Yosef Karo," pp. 703-704.

102 Ross, *Beloved and Hated Tradition*, pp. 301-309.

and apocalyptic visions. They are *bnei nogah maz'hirim* — their central characteristic is the abundance of blinding, mysterious light, one of the characteristics of the mystical feeling. They belong to the heavenly sacred world. This is clear from the description of their appearance as they rise from the water of the lake: “Pure-limbed, sacred, clear,/ as if they have just to-day been stirred/ from the wing of one sacred angel/ who was flying in the heights/ And from their eyes is still peeping/ superior brilliance, the light of the *Shekhina*.”¹⁰³

This idea of worshipping God through the body surprisingly also appears in Zelda's poem “A Banquet,” which describes the moments of physical love. “All the [heavenly] worlds” are guests in the “celebrating palace of the body,” the poet's body. The body is here “A temple of eternal tenderness/ chiseled in the semi-darkness/ of a fleeting moment.”¹⁰⁴ The poem attributes to the body, when united in love to her husband's body and soul, a status of sacredness, no less than the sacredness of the heavenly worlds which enter the body like dignified guests to a royal palace.

Hassidic *avoda be-gashmiut*, however, was not a mystical goal for itself. Physical and material activities were not sacred for themselves, but only when paradoxically used as a means for spiritual elevation. Hassidism valued indifference to the material world and to disembodiment,¹⁰⁵ and bodily delight was viewed as a motivation for spiritual elevation which brings man closer to God. Hassidism thus legitimized earthly natural activities, which in other mystical contexts were rejected. In modern Hebrew poetry, in contrast, physical delights are sometimes described as a sacred experience. They are not only a means to a spiritual experience, but a mystical goal in themselves.

Bialik's attribution of sacredness to childhood and nature was influenced by Romantic views, widespread in 19th century European culture, while the sacredness of the body in Alterman's early poetry was influenced by early 20th century Vitalistic views. Vitality, joy of life, freedom from sorrow, collective unity — all these serve as mystical goals in Hebrew literature during the first half of the 20th century, while the second half of the 20th century saw other

103 Bialik. *Poems 1899-1934*, p. 92.

104 Zelda, *Poems*, p. 51.

105 Elior, “Rabbi Yosef Caro,” pp. 696-700.

goals: disconnection from everyday life, aesthetic experiences and sensual delight. Only toward the end of the 20th century, when religious poets entered the Israeli literary scene, did God return as a frequent mystical goal. However, the image of God, even in such poems, was influenced by modern concepts of sacredness. Thus, for example, in Zelda's "Every Rose" the symbol of sacredness includes modern ideals such as peace, peace of mind, love and aesthetic delight, which brings the poem closer to the world of the secular reader.

Situations of Unity

Many mystical texts deal with the situations, times and activities which support or condition the process of unification with God. Generally speaking, these are extraordinary situations which disconnect the mystic from his everyday life. Night is generally mentioned as the suitable time for mystical activity.

In traditional Jewish mysticism these situations are religious activities such as praying, learning the Torah, concentrating on the name(s) of God, engaging in ascetic behaviors, and also carrying out the religious laws and duties (including sex life and purity laws) with "intention."

Such situations as background for mystical experiences can be found in the poetry of religious Israeli poets. For example, many of Itamar Yazo-Kest's poems describe mystical experiences in time of prayer. In his poem "Preparations for Early Rising"¹⁰⁶ he described a moment of mystical unity while putting on his morning *tefilin*. The whole room seemed to him as if it was on fire, all its details heightened themselves toward the heavenly world, and the four letters of God's name appeared to him in burning forms. The description includes a feeling of physical ecstasy, similar to drinking alcohol, physical burning, blurring the borders between reality and fantasy, feeling tattoo of the burning letters, and seeing visions of the burning room, which turns into a heavenly scene.

Admiel Kosman in his poem "Agitated in Front of the Sun's Windows"¹⁰⁷ described a moment of returning to closeness with the divine Wisdom while

106 Yazo-Kest, *Preparations*.

107 Kosman, *Soft Rags*, p. 17.

learning from a sacred book. Eliaz Cohen in his poem “Unity of Name [God]” described a semi erotic unity with God while touching the threads of his *tsitsit*: “in the same place exactly/ the unity of the four letters name/ was created.”¹⁰⁸ Tania Hadar in her poem “And I Blessed on the Date” described a vision which appeared to her after she recited the blessing *shehechyanu* (Blessed are You [...] Who have Kept Us in Life etc.). The poet sees the date-like color of the heavenly light, uniting the inferior and the superior worlds with thin rain-like threads: “And I blessed over the dates/ the world was filled with primeval orange light of dawn// and the souls came among the trees,/ and people came and touched the trees,/ thin threads hang like threads of rain between man and soul.”¹⁰⁹

The contributions of religious women to modern Hebrew poetry add new religious situations and activities to the well-known repertoire of prayer, study and other male religious rituals. Zelda in her poem “The Silver Candlesticks” wrote that when she lighted the candles she became “A kindling being/ free, happy in God.”¹¹⁰ In her poem “A Shabbat Candle” she compared the candles’ sparks to the heavenly palaces, where she could enter while lighting the candles.¹¹¹

These poems may seem to be a return to the convention of traditional mysticism, where unity was possible only through religious activity. However, the stylistic performance of the mystical impression testifies to the modern context: the description includes realistic details, it is completely personal, and its system of symbols, metaphors and similes is idiosyncratic and original. All this adds much authenticity to the emotional effect of the poem.

Hassidism added singing, dancing, drinking, smoking, and even everyday relationships to the religious rituals of Kabbalist mysticism. Recommendations of seclusion, going out to nature, confession, learning in *havruta* (group learning) — situations and activities which are not religious duties, but can support spiritual elevation — were added. The differences between mystical situations and activities in different streams of traditional Jewish mysticism (e.g. Kabbalah versus Hassidism) reflect differences of views about the way to achieve religious sacredness. These differences were culture-oriented,

108 Cohen, “Unity of Name.”

109 Hadar, *In the Lands of Life*, p. 16.

110 Zelda, *Poems*, p. 25.

111 *Ibid.*, p. 29.

sometimes influenced by the contemporary non-Jewish context. For example, group learning while walking at night was the central mystical activity of the Zohar Kabbalists,¹¹² while in Hassidism the importance of study was diminished, and instead the importance of prayer, performing of religious duties with “intention,” singing, dancing, eating and even smoking became central as part of the mystical ritual. The Hassidic mystical situation enables group mystical activity and connection with God through everyday activities.

It is only natural to expect that the mystical situations and activities in 20th century literature, in a completely different cultural context, would be different from those which were important for Jewish traditional mysticism. In modern Hebrew poetry, nature and love are the main mystical situations. This clearly shows the influence of Romantic presuppositions, according to which they are the conditions for the creation of inner purification and spiritual joy. Romantic presuppositions also dictated loneliness as a condition for unity with sacredness, and artistic play as a liberating and purifying activity. Modern views about the importance of everyday activities together with Hassidic influences enabled the writers to find mystical situations in everyday life, such as looking out the window or walking along the sea or even cleaning the house.

In contrast to night time, which is the characteristic mystical time in kabbalistic and Hassidic sources, in modern Hebrew literature mystical experiences often happen during the day, the strong and healthy light of the sun taking on the mystical function of the soft, mysterious light of the moon. This change of decoration reflects a major change in the system of values.

Ecstasy as Disembodiment

Ecstasy is an extreme mental and emotional situation characteristic of the mystical experience. William James wrote that the extreme delight of the mystical experience is beyond what is known by regular consciousness; it is accompanied by physical reactions; it is so sharp that it borders on pain; and it is too strong to be expressed by words.¹¹³ An example of such an

112 Helner-Eshed, *A River*, pp. 138-176.

113 James, *The Religious Experience*, p. 270.

extreme feeling of unbearable delight, bordering on pain, can be found in the poems of the Christian woman mystic Mechtild of Magdeburg (1210-1285).¹¹⁴ Mystical ecstasy is an emotional reaction of astonishment to the miracle of unity with God and the transformation of the self into a divine being.¹¹⁵ In that sense it is different from other abnormal psychological states of mind such as trance or drug intoxication, which are not mystical and do not include a feeling of contact with a sacred being, a revelation of visions and an understanding of a sacred truth.¹¹⁶ Mystical ecstasy is a temporary feeling of total self-oblivion and a passage into another, perfect world. The Greek word *ekstasis* denotes disembodiment.¹¹⁷ Jewish mystics who wrote in Hebrew preferred terms such as *hitpashtut mi-gashmiut* (disembodiment), *bitul ha-yesh* (cancellation of being), *hitpa'alut* or *hitla-havut* (excitement) and *nevu'ah* (prophecy).¹¹⁸

It is perhaps surprising to find in poems written by non-observant poets descriptions of happy disembodiment. Pinhas Sadeh described his ecstatic disembodiment in his cycle of poems "The Way to the Landscapes of Wine."¹¹⁹ The last poem of the cycle begins with a description of total passive devotion, accompanied by synaesthetic impressions which combine voices of song and images of light. The poet expressed his excitement by calling "Oh, here is the blooming of thousands of springs," then, using metaphors of strong light and fire, continues: "and here the light of God touches the entrances of the soul (...) Out of *kilyon ha-nefesh* (yearning, literally: the dying of the soul) for this love the walls of the wine houses are burning, the women are weeping." Ecstasy reaches its climax at the end of this poem, the two last lines of which are written in bold letters, as if to say that the words themselves are not enough to express the powerful feelings: "And the drunkards are singing His beauty and power — / **while like a golden bell burning in fire God descends on**

114 Mechtild of Magdeburg, *Mechtild of Magdeburg*, p. 46

115 Laski, *Ecstasy*; Eliade, *Shamanism*.

116 Ufenheimer, "Prolegomena." Ufenheimer views ecstasy as a sub-category of trans.

117 *Ibid.*, pp. 53-54.

118 On ecstasy in Jewish mysticism see Scholem, *Kabbalah*, pp. 119-155; Idel, *Abulafia*, esp. chs. 1-2; idem, *Hassidism*; Elshtein, *Ecstasy and the Hassidic Story*; Pedaia, *The Sight and the Speech*; Helner-Eshed, *A River*, pp. 377-378; Sherlo, *The Valor and the Modesty*, pp. 272-273.

119 Sadeh, *Poems*, pp.52-57.

me,/ and I, like its tongue, am laughing, laughing, laughing and singing in it.” Here the poet is burning inside the bell like a martyr, and with his death he is filled with happiness, laughter and heavenly joy. A feeling of disembodiment is described here while overcoming the parting from a beloved woman and devotion to God. The experience takes place against the background of “wine houses,” which together with the drunkards who are sitting there are disembodied: “and even the walls of the wine houses sing, for the beams of our houses [have become] violins.” Drunkenness and disembodiment take place here simultaneously.

The wish for disembodiment appears in Yona Wollach’s “To Live as Quick as Biography.”¹²⁰ This poem describes a process of entering into a situation of transition while liberating the poet from “material which almost does not exist except in the world of evil.” This semi-theological terminology is used by a woman poet whose life was very far from what is in Israel considered to be “religious.”

It is less surprising to find poetic descriptions of disembodiment in the poetry of observant poets: Haviva Pedaia in her “The Sloughing of Light”¹²¹ described how she was sloughing “the skin’s clothes” from herself, namely getting rid of whatever is external to the soul proper, and together with the pain she felt purified “like a pearl that was plucked from its shell.” Her material being fell down from her and her soul was transformed into light. She completely lost consciousness: “But there is no memory here and no forgetfulness/ there is only life and death/ light and sloughing.” The complete devotion endowed her with a feeling of real, lightened life. Yosef Ozer in his poem “*Kol Nidrei*”¹²² (the prayer which is said at the beginning of the eve of the Day of Atonement) described the purification of the soul from the “clothes” of social- and self-insincerity. Purification is for him the ability to see and treat oneself with complete sincerity: “and this is not easy [for the soul] to be open for yourself:/ to say the word which extradites/ the tailors of cheating/ and to be careful/ that not only you yourself will thread their needle.”

120 Wollach, *Forms*, pp. 203-204.

121 Pedaia, *The Origin of the Soul*, pp. 32-33.

122 Ozer, *A Name and a Kingdom*, p. 21.

Paradoxically, disembodiment in modern Hebrew poetry is often described (by both observant and non-observant poets) as simultaneous with very bodily and erotic experiences. The idea of worshipping God through bodily activity has its roots in traditional Jewish mysticism: the Tsfat Kabbalists attributed mystical value to sex between man and woman, if done “with intention,” and Hassidism cherished the idea of *avoda be-gashmiut* (worshipping God through the body). In Zelda’s poem “A Banquet”¹²³ the beloved body of the poet is transformed into “a palace” and “a castle,” then it becomes “a kingdom” and “a temple.” In it a banquet takes place, festive, exciting, intoxicating, during which the body makes a covenant with the ocean and is being flooded by its water. Zelda described the act of love, when the body is opened to happiness and to unrecognized desires, as an exciting cosmic event. The poet’s body encircles and offers its hospitality to the heavenly worlds, becoming bigger than them, or at least equal to them. The body is here a kingdom which possesses a castle and can make covenants with the ocean and with “Miracles” — mythical-divine beings. The heavenly worlds kindle torches which light the castle, and the castle opens its gates “to the sun, to pain, to a new-born being.” The opening of the castle’s gate is a metaphor for the complete devotion of the body to love. The covenant is made “with music of the yearning’s violins,” a metaphor for the powerful feelings of wonder and flooding, which entail a certain surrender of the poet’s kingly aristocracy. The opening of the castle’s gates enables entrance to both the heavenly worlds and the ocean’s dangerous depths, namely, the unconscious desires. This covenant enables them to unite in the body and soul of the poet in a time of love. It turns the poet into “a temple of eternal tenderness.” The poem’s ending, “in a half darkness of a melting minute,” witnesses that the experience is momentary. The religious woman poet Zelda, like Bialik and Alterman, connected the mystical experience with a sudden breaking of borders and with the feeling of the body’s unusual freedom. She also connected this inner revolution with nature — the sun and the ocean. Unlike Bialik and Alterman, Zelda experienced the mystical ecstasy together with a feeling of *hitmalkhut*, becoming kingly. The poet is here transformed into a princess, a queen or an

123 Zelda, *Poems*, p. 51

empress, equal in status to the superior kingdom. The flood of desire causes the kingdom to be born, to dance and to be recreated, but it does not damage the poet's nobility and does not make heaven be part of earth.

Communicating Excitement

Written expressions of ecstasy are characterized by their rhetorical signs of great excitement: repetitions, exclamation marks, words which denote strong feelings; enigmatic style; metaphors such as fire, storm, and drunkenness; unrealistic imagery; and by the use of paradoxes and synaesthesia. These stylistic elements express the extreme emotional situation of the narrator and his feeling of disconnection from reality. Although ecstasy is an essential element of Jewish mysticism — it is clearly present in the *heikhalot* poetry and in Middle-Ages religious poetry — many Jewish mystical texts tell the reader *about* mystical experiences in a relatively moderate tone, without an effort to convey a vivid extreme feeling of ecstasy to the reader. The mystical *midrash*, which is the main stylistic device of mystical discourse in the *Zohar* and in many other Jewish mystical texts, conveys an emotional atmosphere of learning and interpretation, not of emotional flood. It is also interlarded with epic legends, which do not convey a mood of immediate excitement. Ecstasy is often missing from Jewish mystical texts, which contain theosophical ideas or advice about theurgical practices, not attempts to reconstruct and revive mystical experiences by words. Even in the rare cases in which mystical experiences are written as a personal memoir or a confession (for example in the memoirs of Rabbi Yosef Caro and Rabbi Yitzhak of Akko), the tone of the narrator tends to be documentary, as if wishing to convince the reader of the authenticity of the experience, not to share it with him.¹²⁴

Modern Hebrew mystical poems do not deal with mystical theology or with mystical practices; they intend only to transmit the feeling of excitement, astonishment and ecstasy which the poet experienced and to share it with the

124 Even the style of the few mystical diaries which were written by Jewish mystics is hardly ecstatic. See Pechter's introduction to Azikri, *Heavenly Words*, pp. 22-23; Shwarz, *Religious Zionism*, pp. 149-197; Garb, *The Chosen*, pp. 57-63.

reader. The authenticity of the ecstasy is not reached by documenting it, but by indirect stylistic devices which express its high emotional tension. A comparison between an excerpt from the Zohar, which tells about the symbolic doe-*Shekhina*, and a modern Hebrew poem, which alludes to the same symbol, can serve as an example for the difference of tone between the mystical discourse in the Zohar and in modern Hebrew poetry:

And when the world needs rain all the animals gather by her [the doe], and she mounts on a high mountain and wraps her head between with her knees and bleats one bleat after another bleat, and the Holy One Blessed be He hears her voice and He is filled with compassion and He pities the world, and she descends from the top of the mountain and runs and hides herself, and all the other animals run after her but do not find her. This is the meaning of “Like a deer yearning for river beds.”¹²⁵

The text of the Zohar is very powerful, but its tone is epic and explanatory, without any explicit signs of enthusiasm or astonishment. It tells a non-realistic, symbolic story about the *Shekhina*, God and the world, ending it with a reference to a sentence from the Psalms, as if this whole amazing story was a part of learning the Torah and interpreting its true hidden meaning. On the basis of this text Rivka Miriam wrote her poem “The Doe”:

That passing by doe
could be the thing. Let me say: she really was.
that passing doe really was the thing. I shall mount on a scene,
I shall stand on a top of a mountain
certainly I shall say:
that passing by doe really was the thing.¹²⁶

The rhetoric in this poem is hypnotic, evocative, swearing, and full of astonishment. The speaker (and the reader) gradually becomes more and more convinced of the reality of the unreal event. The poem sweeps the reader into a process of gradual drunkenness.

125 Tishbi, Zohar vol 1 pp. 237-239.

126 Rivka Miriam, *Place, Tiger*, p. 12.

The ecstatic tone in 20th century Hebrew mystical poetry is common to religious and non-religious poets. The observant poet Yosef Zvi Rimmon (1889-1958) wrote: “When the wind/spirit descends out of love the soul is growling:/ Spread your wings of brilliance on me, my God!/ Look, this is the hour of happiness — let me not be silent!/ Sacred longings overbalance the day of pain./ I am tired of rhymes, I long for the vision of Your sacredness (...) Order glory, my Father, order redemption, my God (...) Roar, my lion-father, raise your voice, my God./ Order your mercy, YAH my rock! Shaddai, Shaddai!”¹²⁷

The observant poet Zelda in her poem “The Silver Candlesticks” wrote: “Their living flames [of the Shabbat candles]/ kissed my soul,/ and my reflections became a river of blossoms/ of rosy complexion/ they became birds from wild forests,/ became lightnings.”¹²⁸ In the same way, an ecstatic tone can be found in the poems of Ayin (Aliza) Tur-Malka (Greenberg), Uri Zvi Greenberg’s wife (until his death in 1981) and the mother of their 5 children. She was born in Jerusalem in 1926, was a member of the LECHI (an underground movement at the end of the mandatory regime in Palestine), and wrote ecstatic mystical poetry, which express the yearnings of the secular Israeli-born for disembodiment and to contact with sources of spiritual energy beyond the everyday world. Tur-Malka described the experience of elevation to the heights of spirituality in a language which endows this experience with a powerful sensuality and authenticity. Here is a small example: “A burning yearning in the bodies for the image of the wings, (...) the shell, the almond, the shape of the eyes,/ the ears, the leaves, the flames (...) our heart like a bird taking off / sending waves of blood while flying/ into the orbit of the veins.”¹²⁹ The style, the images and the repetitions express an experience of total self-oblivion and self-denuding, without any selfish calculation or interest. Tur-Malka described love which does not step back from suffering and sacrifice, even bringing herself to it with joy, not considering reality, beyond consciousness, to the place where the border between life and death is deleted. Perfection, absolute happiness and peace are present there. Such is her love for man, for parents, for Jerusalem, and for the

127 Rimmon, *Crowns*, p. 84.

128 Zelda, *Poems*, p. 25.

129 Tur-Malka, *Return My Soul*, p. 21.

land of Israel. She compared this spiritual yearning to the love of the baby for his mother: “Lips of roses, self burning love,/ is known to the suckling babe./ He does not know that he is sad — / this is why his sadness is pure.”¹³⁰

Enigmatic language is a central device in the Zohar. Modern Hebrew poets also use enigmatic language, sometimes — against the background of modern psychology — creating the impression of unconscious speech, pronounced in a dream or in half-consciousness. An example is Amir Gilboa’s poem *Bekitso Li-Mereishito*.¹³¹ This strange expression (which opens the poem itself) includes the words *ketz* (end) and *rosh* (head/ beginning), which can be understood as denoting beginning and end, but in the reverse order. The word *ketz* alludes to prophecies about the End of Days, while the word *lemereishito* is similar in its sound to the words *reishit* and *bereishit* (beginning, Genesis). These allusions and connotations lead the reader to the mythological meaning of these two words, which in the poem opens a vision beyond the existing reality. The word *bekitso* also sounds close to *bahakitso* (when he awoke), which might allude to the dream of Jacob, who woke up after he slept on a stone which was *limrashotav* (under his head). All these lead to understanding the poem as describing a revelation in a dream, similar to Jacob’s. These two words carry then a very heavy load of meaning (which does not become lighter as the poem progresses). Such stylistic richness and intensity seem to be rare in traditional mysticism. They make the emotional aspect of the text more communicative to the modern reader than traditional Jewish mystical texts.

The Anxiety of Ecstasy

A positive attitude to extreme emotional expression is not automatic; it depends on the value which is attributed by the specific culture to extreme feelings in general and to ecstasy in particular. Jewish rabbinic culture treated mystical ecstasy with suspicion and ambivalence. The main reason for that reaction was not transcendentalist theology, in the frame of which close contact with God is not possible (this reasoning became dominant

¹³⁰ Ibid., 148.

¹³¹ Gilboa, *Poems*, vol 2, p. 173.

in the Middle Ages), but the evaluation of sanity, common sense and social responsibility, and maybe also the masculine fear of being out of control.

Ecstasy became a legitimate element in Jewish religious life and literature only beginning in the 13th century, a fact which did not prevent earlier sporadic, sometimes influential, documentation of ecstatic mystical experiences.¹³² The positive value of ecstasy became accepted in the mystical literature of the Tsfat Kabbalah (affected, perhaps, by Moslem influence), many of whose texts are guidebooks for readers who wish to attain the desirable ecstasy, and later in Hassidism (under the influence of Slavic sects). Here the desire for ecstasy began to be considered a natural human inclination, without any sign of anxiety. Viewing the descriptions of powerful delight in the meeting with God, the sources of ancient Jewish mysticism — the Talmud and the *heikhalot* literature — also include many warnings against the dangers of “entering the *pardes* (Garden).” In this context the presence of God causes not only feelings of great joy, but also feelings of *yir’at Elohim* or *tremendum* (awe).¹³³ In the *Heikhalot* literature, great fear and even emotional shock is an inseparable part of the process of reaching the heavenly world.¹³⁴

The anxiety of ecstasy, the consciousness of its abnormality and the fear of its dangerous results are a common denominator between ancient Jewish mysticism and a few modern Hebrew mystical poems. Viewing the attraction to European neo-mysticism, on the one hand, and to Jewish mysticism, on the other, secular Zionism treated mysticism with suspicion and disbelief, as part of a general suspicion of irrationalism and religion. In this context, writing a poem about nature, loneliness or love was much more expected than writing about ecstatic mystical experiences. Feelings of anxiety, the fear of dangers, and the struggle with superhuman powers appear in modern Hebrew poems to express mystical ecstasy. These struggles with the “danger” sometimes intensify the mystical achievement and its ecstatic mood.

Bialik in his essay “Covering and Uncovering by Language” (1915) described the poet’s moments of ecstatic creativity, when he peeps into a hidden,

132 Idel, *Hassidism*, pp. 99, 103.

133 Otto, *Sacredness*, pp. 17-27.

134 Pedaya, *The Sight and the Speech*, pp. 69-70.

sacred truth, as if walking on a river in a thaw — the ice being the words which cover the terrible depths of the soul and of reality as they really are. During this partial, momentary peeping into the sacred depths of truth, the poet feels as if his life is in danger. In his poem “He Peeped and Died,” (1916) Bialik described Ben-Azai’s voyage to God as very dangerous. It leads him not only to insanity and death (see ch. 4), but also to self-degradation and to the loss of his torch, the symbol of his mission. In this poem Bialik expressed his great disappointment with the terrible price paid for ecstatic devotion to a sacred goal, which, when found, does not seem sacred any more. In both essay and poem the mystical ecstasy is not delightful but fearful.

Shlonsky’s poem “Captivity” describes the poet’s struggle against his attraction to mystery, fearing that it will lead him to madness or sin. When the poet at last allows himself to listen to the voice of the divine feminine, the symbol of sacredness, he says: “Who-who maddened my nights-days together/ and who ordered me to sing in the Valley of Tears?”¹³⁵ His attraction to mysticism is involuntary, forced by superhuman dangerous powers, and it results in insane discourse.

The feelings of fear and physical or inner “trembling” — together with great happiness — are mentioned in many poems which describe mystical experiences. “*Hag va-kharada*” (glory and great fear), writes Amir Gilboa in “*Bekitso Li-Mereishito*,” and it is not by chance that he located these two words in a separate line. The style of the poem is not always ecstatic enough to convince the reader of the authenticity of these extreme feelings. The poet Sh. Shalom (pseudonym of Shalom Yosef Shapiro, 1904-1990) in his poem “The Tree Growing at Night” also described mystical yearnings as a dangerous madness. The poet’s feelings are projected on the tree, which feels “the juices of God/ burning in the chasms of darkness” as its soul approaches “the sources of eternity.” At the same time the tree “wishes to become mad from the sacredness of knowledge/ and wishes to be destroyed.”¹³⁶ Ezra Zoussman in his poem “In the Point’s Secret”¹³⁷ wrote that while anxiously approaching

135 Shlonsky, *Poems*, vol. 1 p. 193.

136 Sh. Shalom, *In the Heart of the World*, p. 41.

137 Zoussman, *Poems*, p. 355.

the feeling of sacredness his *neshama yeteira* (superior soul) “was trembling [from fear] in the secret of the uniting point.” In these two poems, the direct, explicit expression of ecstasy weakens the impression of authenticity.

The religious poet Yosef Ozer (born in 1952) in his poem “*Hitkomemut*” (Uprising/ Becoming Independent)¹³⁸ described his mystical experience thus: “Trembling I am all over on a string. And a northern wind is coming/ it has already come at me/ from distances of beauty.” Itamar Yaoz-Kest in his poem “The Resurrection of the Sacred Animals”¹³⁹ described an experience of horror while the “sacred animals” were surrounding him. In Shimon Shloush’s poem “Seven Stages Led to the Mount of Sinai”¹⁴⁰ the poet, following Moses, is mounting to the Sinai mountain, and sees the ten commandments written with all the rainbow’s colors. The poem ends with the words “and there was a great fear in this matter [alluding to Rabbi Nahman’s style of narration] / a great fear to remain without *klipot* (peels, skin — the symbol of the demonic aspect of the body).” Using the Kabbalistic term *klipot* the poet expresses his fear of laying himself bare, of departing from the body and the terrestrial world, without their protection and consolation. Similarly in Rivka Miriam’s poem “They Peeled Me”¹⁴¹ the anxiety results from the fear of losing bodily life. Unity with God in this poem fills the poet with both joy and weeping: “Only wings were left on my body/ only weeping eyes were left on me.” The disappearance of the body leaves the poet with her weeping, takes life away from her. The heavenly worlds are worlds of weeping and death, with which she unites when she is one with God.

Active and Passive Delight and Joy

The feeling of joy is an important component of mystical ecstasy. It is the climax of the mystical experience. Its emotional and physical manifestations can be either active or passive. James defined the mystical

138 Ozer, *A Name and a Kingdom*, p. 21.

139 Yaoz-Kest, *Summons*, p. 9.

140 Shloush, “Seven Stages.”

141 Rivka Miriam, *I Drowned in Windows*, p. 79.

experience as passive and emphasized absolute nirvana-like inner peace, which the mystic feels when he is in ecstasy.¹⁴² Pedaia distinguished between interiorized or passive ecstasy, whose physical manifestations are static, and exteriorized ecstasy, which is expressed by powerful accelerated activity.¹⁴³ Idel suggested classifying mystical experiences not according to the mystic's emotions and feelings (about which it is difficult to know the truth), but according to his actions and manner of speech.¹⁴⁴ The preference of active or passive ecstasy is not only a matter of temperament; it is connected with the concept of sacredness and with the value which is attributed to physical activity or to its avoidance. The various external expressions of ecstasy are influenced by cultural traditions. For example, while passive ecstasy is characteristic of the mystical practices and texts of the Far East, wild dances, songs and drunken-like behavior are used in mystical rituals of East-European sects, and were inherited by Hassidism.

In the Zohar the delight and happiness of the mystic while he studies the Torah is a central theme. This feeling of joy is often referred to as *oneg* (delight), *no'am* (pleasure) and *nakhat* (satisfaction), and also as *sha'ashu'a* (play, amusement). It is often described in metaphors of being flooded in water and light.¹⁴⁵ The joy in the Zohar and its physical expressions are passive in comparison to the Hassidic ecstatic joy, in which eating and drinking, singing, dancing and storytelling are means of making contact with God.

In modern Hebrew literature ecstasy appears in a variety of expressions, both active and passive. For example, Bialik in his long poem "Zohar" described the child's extroverted, active ecstasy. Here the child feels drunken-like joy which brings him to physical, playful, wild activity. He finds himself drawn to jumping, dancing, roistering and splashing water and light. He calls the zephyrs to join him in a series of cries which express his enthusiasm. In contrast, in "The Lake" Bialik described the poet's introvert-passive ecstasy while sitting on the lake's shore and looking into its water. The poet sits there without moving, absorbed in tense listening to the voice of God, which "suddenly explodes out of the silence."

142 James, *The Religious Experience*, p. 150.

143 Pedaia, "Mystical Experience," p. 74.

144 Idel, "Unio Mystica as a Criterion."

145 Helner-Eshed, *A River*, pp. 167-176, 378-379.

Descriptions of ecstatic mystical joy in modern Hebrew literature often allude to the Hassidic tradition. Criticizing the “dying,” passive spiritual situation of traditional rabbinical Diaspora Judaism, Hebrew poets and prose writers found in Hassidic joy a source of modern Jewish spiritual revival (see ch. 2) and of the new Jewish vitality. Already in 1897 Micha Yosef Berdychevsky in his poetical essay “Dances”¹⁴⁶ defined the dances of the first Hassidim as “mystical worship,” distinguishing them from non-religious folk dances: “In these dances there is something which is similar to sacredness, through them we dance before God when we want to talk to Him.” Berdychevsky described the Hassidic dance as a spiritual dramatic event which disconnected the dancers from the secular reality, “where the people of the world (...) go whoring after their eyes and following their obstinacies.” The dance united the dancers into “one movement, a movement of freedom, similar to the heavenly one, similar to the absolute substance.” The dancers felt “their relation to the superior light, the eternal light, which is manifested in all the treasures of reality.” They yearned to “unite with everything, to hug unto God, to hug with one’s whole heart, soul and essence (...) he [the Hassid] is highly excited, he is dancing, and this is the secret of unity.” The dance itself is described as a clearly ecstatic activity. Here Berdychevsky tried to transmit the process of a growing spiritual joy, until the climax, when the dancers are in total disembodiment:

And they pull up their socks and they dance with a mood of spiritual happiness, slowly at first, whispering, while on their faces light and shadows lie; they are thinking, they are indulged, they are uniting, then they move faster, they run in a circle, they make noise with their legs and raise their hands as though imploring, as though asking to save their lives, and the movement becomes stronger and stronger, the running goes round and round (...) their legs are hovering, almost not touching the ground. And here they are rising and flying in the air and light is on their faces and instead of eyes they have torches for light and they are joyful, joyful in a joy which turns over the whole soul, and their heart is full of love and nostalgia to the God of the Shekhina. They are abstract, they are not in this world.¹⁴⁷

146 Berdychevsky, “Dances.”

147 Ibid.

The evaluation of physical activity was inlaid in the modern movement of Jewish Revival, both during the *Hasskala* period and in Zionism. Together with rationalistic, positivistic and Socialist views about the need to make Jewish life more active, the revitalization of the Jew was viewed as a mythical transformation, a mystical miracle. The mystical view of joy and play is a continuation of the Kabbalist and Hassidic tradition,¹⁴⁸ wherein these activities were means of disembodiment and were closely connected with religious worship. Zionist poets took these activities as a means of spiritual and emotional elevation, even without fulfilling all the details of the Jewish religious laws.

In contrast to the Romantic concept of Revival, according to which the individual and the nation can be redeemed by reviving the moral purity of their sources, at the beginning of the 20th century the European idea of Revival developed more mythical contents, according to which Revival is not possible without an extreme, aggressive ecstasy. This concept of Revival explains the attraction to dance in general and to Hassidic dance in particular. Such an attitude to dance was popular in European culture at the beginning of the 20th century; it echoes in the music and ballet of Wagner, Stravinsky and Bartok. The philosophical background of this stance is Nietzschean, namely, the presupposition that modern European culture is in a dangerous state of decadence, which without an extreme revitalization will lead to its death. Dance is, of course, a physically and emotionally energetic activity, in contrast to activities such as study, prayer, seclusion and other ascetic behaviors.

The “Hora” dance was an inseparable part of pre-state Zionist reality. It was an expression of the new Jewish vitality, in contrast to the decadent Diaspora Jewish life, and at the same time it was looked at as a continuation of Hassidic tradition. Memoirs of these dances tell about situations of trance or even madness after the Hora dance. Poems which describe this dance focus on the joy of dancing as a way to overcome deep sorrows, nostalgia and loss of family life.¹⁴⁹

In Yitzhak Lamdan’s “Massada,” enthusiastic dances are the Zionist way of continuing the Hassidic tradition. Under the title “Enthusiasm” the poet

148 Shohat, “On Joy in Hassidism”; Fishbane, *The Exegetical Imagination*, pp. 151-225; Etkes, “The BESHT as a Mystic,” p. 456.

149 Auerbach, “Mystical Union and Grief.”

describes the dances of the “Massada” pioneers.¹⁵⁰ He compares their dance to a growing fire: “A dance was lit,” “The fire of our feet will set stones alight — until they burn up.” The final chord of this poem is the appearance of God, who joins the circle of dancers: “God with us in the circle is singing: ‘Israel’” (reminiscent of Blok’s “The Twelve,” in which Jesus joins the Bolshevik guards). The dance removes the disconnection between the pioneers and their Jewish past and at the same time enables them to experience an intimate contact with God. This unity is confirmed by the elements of nature: ‘Mountains, mountains, bow your heads / and say Amen!’ Lamdan emphasized the dancers’ feeling of power, the confirmation of their hopes, and their freedom from fears. Moreover, their dance has mythical cosmic powers: “East, West, North, South/ are in a dance [...] Where a rock stands — it will turn aside, it will be ground.” The dance has a mythical power to change Jewish history: “Give way, generations’ fate,/ take care!” It erases the difference between heaven and earth and turns the dancers into mythological giants: “You are too low, heaven,/ for our heads./ Get down, stretch like carpets/ here at our feet!” Heaven and the planets turn into an orchestra, and the dancers are its members: “Like a drum with our heads/ we shall hit the sky (...) prepare the suns for drums,/ and the stars — for cymbals!” The dance gives the dancers a feeling of power and of command over their fates and the whole of Jewish history. Alluding to Moses’ blessing (Deuter. 33:3) and to Bialik’s poem “On Top of Har’el” (which reconstructs this Biblical scene), texts which refer to the superiority of God over all the nations, Lamdan wrote: “Yesterdays at our feet/ bow down./ Hey, to-morrows!/ Prepare a present,/ pave a road!” These allusions strengthen the mythical, superhuman image of the dancers.

Later in this long poem, the dancers’ voices order “to-morrows” to set out for a new way, speaking in a low style, like a commander to a soldier or a master to his servant. This mixture of Biblical archaic and everyday style characterizes the dance as a revolutionary deed which turns the whole world upside down. The dance redeems not only the dancers from their emotional stress, but also the whole world, which has become powerless: “Bow, world, your bald head/ to our redeeming dance.”

150 Lamdan, *Massada*, pp. 41-42.

The central experience of the dancers in “Massada” is the superhuman overcoming of inner difficulties and the heroic readiness for superhuman suffering, qualities which are needed for the redemption of the Jewish nation. With ecstasy they join each other, nature and the God of Israel. Ecstasy turns them into the creators of Jewish history. It bridges the chasm between them and their ancestors’ traditions. The double unity with the sacredness of both the Zionist project and Jewish history enables them to overcome the stresses of depression and loneliness.

In Aryeh Ludwig Strauss’ poem “Come Out, My Soul, with the Dance of the Poem”¹⁵¹ the poet’s soul dances in front of God’s light. Here too the dance expresses the compassion of the poet, who shares the fate of the Jewish people, the fate of a victim. The dance enables him to change his attitude to his situation from that of a victim and to rejoice in it. Unlike the collective dance in Lamdan’s “Massada,” here we have an erotic dance of the poet-bridegroom with a feminine divine image. The dance turns the mourning into joy, it enables one to accept all tortures with love, to wear a dress of stars and to accept even death. The dance here expresses devotion and acceptance, which are not possible without ecstasy.

In Rivka Miriam’s poem “Dances”¹⁵² the poet’s spirit — after she herself is dead — is dancing in the streets in front of God: “My spirit went out to dance and my God watched her.” During this dance, the poet’s spirit delivers a host of infants and causes the whole of being — whether alive or dead — to dance. The center of this poem is not the relationship between the poet and God, but her ability to stimulate the whole of mankind, even the dead, with joy and vitality. The dance is an act of mythically overcoming the Jewish death into which the poet and her generation were born.

Of course dance — symbolically connecting the modern Jew to Hassidism — is not the only expression of ecstasy, which is often physical. In Alterman’s poems it is expressed as the freedom from bodily drives and by descriptions of nature, reflecting the poet’s state of mind. Ecstasy is here needed for the paradoxical, irrational rejection of the modern pessimistic world view. The

151 Strauss, *Hours and Generation*, p. 79-80.

152 Rivka Miriam, *I Drowned in the Windows*, p. 85.

miracle of mystical joy is confronted with the permanent sad state of reality. Thus in Alterman's "A Sudden Day," after three stanzas in which the poet speaks of his ecstatic joy, which blurs the boundary between heaven and earth, he begins speaking in first person plural about the situation of his generation: "On our lips the languid smile has become old,/ in the houses of solitude we plodded./ The ennui of Your times is known by heart,/ and we are its greatest connoisseurs." The next stanza says that the poet's generation has completely lost the capacity of joy and is blind like a mole, which is not capable of seeing daylight. Joy is a present of love which God has stealthily passed over to the poet and to his contemporaries, just for a moment, but they are not capable of receiving it, because they are immersed in ennui and do not have the faculties to enjoy it. Joy here is a manifestation of God's presence, which is trying to touch human beings, but they are already incapable of a reciprocal step.

Such a view of joy as a sacred goal which redeems the poet and through him the whole Zionist community is common to early Alterman in his books "Stars Outside" (1938) and "The Joy of the Poor" (1941) as well as to Amir Gilboa in poems which were written during the 1940s-1950s. Gilboa's long poem "For then I'll Cry,"¹⁵³ which opens the cycle "Seven Authorities" (1941-1949) is an ecstatic vision of redemption, wherein reality as a whole, including all human beings, is transformed into a celebrating palace. The poem opens with the words *be-yom ha-gil ki yakhil* (In the day of joy when it comes) and then "the *halal* (space/ dead person) will become a palace in a holiday." The word *yakhil* can be read *yakhel* (will begin) or as an allusion to Isaiah 26:17, where *yakhil* means the woman's pangs of birth, or as an allusion to Psalms 29:8 where the voice of God *yakhil* (will frighten) the desert. The word *halal* can also be understood both as space and as a dead person. The second meaning becomes clearer at the poem's end, which envisions a holiday when every man will turn from *halal* to *heikhal* (temple). Throughout the poem the powerful words *ki az ets'ak* (For then I'll shout) repeat again and again. These words are written at the beginning of five stanzas in a separate line. Three stanzas open with the prophetic words "And it will be a shout of -." Together with other stylistic and rhetoric means these words

153 Gilboa, *Poems*, vol. 1, pp. 10-13.

create an extreme ecstatic impression. The main feelings which are expressed in this poem are wrath and joy, the feelings of the one who can successfully create a revolution which will purify the whole world. In the last stanza the poet envisions the extermination of the whole world by means of his sacred shout of wrath: “And the winds of my wrath will sweep the cosmos/ and my fiery tongues will lick the evil to infinity (...) And I shall not shout any more.” The poet’s shouts calms down when the world and human beings are transformed into a sacred temple of holiday and joy. The shout which is heard throughout the poem expresses a variety of extreme feelings — joy and delight, wrath, anxiety, revolt, compassion and love — and they all endow the poet with mythological powers, which will enable him to redeem the world. It expresses great happiness: “And also in moments of embracing and hugging and pressing my little one’s breasts./ And because I have not lived thousands of thousands of times and have not died the same number of times.” The shout is an expression of ecstasy through which eternal voices, which the poet heard in his childhood but now are hidden, rise in this soul. “And I’ll shout — / when voices of eternities which were evaporated in the lap of my childhood are embodied in me.”

Other poets describe ecstatic unity with sacredness not as a stormy event, full of overt excitement, but as a peaceful, silent, experience which is nevertheless very surprising and intensive. It enables the poet to disconnect from everyday reality and to watch it from a divine point of view. This is not a lukewarm easiness, but a strong inner event of passage into another state of existence, of dream-like peacefulness, a feeling of fullness and omniscience, which frees one from the need to move. This is “Buddha’s smile,” which expresses complete, eternal peace.¹⁵⁴ Gershom Scholem connected this state of mind with the Kabbalistic *histaklut mokhin* (reflection/introspection/contemplation).¹⁵⁵ Haviva Pedaia said in an interview that her mystical experience is a clarification, a purification, a feeling as if many curtains have fallen down from her eyes.”¹⁵⁶

154 Sharfshtein, *The Mystical Experience*, p. 83.

155 Scholem, *The Beginnings of Kabbala*, pp. 61-65.

156 Pedaia, “Interview,” p. 188.

An example for such an ecstasy is Yokheved Bat-Miriam's poem "The Wondering of My Blood."¹⁵⁷ The mystical experience here, even in its climax, is not stormy. The poet feels a peace of mind which disconnects the self from its regular situation and from terrestrial needs, while supplying her with a divine feeling. The poet sees "worlds, worlds not from here," which rise and wrap her with a feeling of dream, peace and glory. The revelation brings "deserted sacredness" back to reality, and this sacredness is a divine being which spreads its wing, which also looks like an eye, over the poet. This is "The wing of Your open-closed eye," a paradoxical eye which unites the contrasts. The poet also closes her whole physical being and passes into another sphere: "I'll close my face and listen,/ I'll cover my face and pass." Here the self is not flooded with emotions, it is only wrapped with sacredness and enlarged unto divine dimensions. The poet becomes kingly, which makes her "of much mercy and light." Her regular poor and narrow self is eliminated, while her new greatness does not depend on any external achievement or satisfaction of needs. The inner peace frees her of stresses and expectations: "And kingdom, kingdom was given / to whoever asks nothing." In this poem there is no cry, trembling or fainting, only a peaceful smile. The feeling is of inner happy fulfillment, which enables the poet to return to reality as a giving, mystically enlightened person.

A similar feeling was described by Zelda in her poem "I am a Dead Bird."¹⁵⁸ The first stanza (half) of this poem is about inner death and painful offense. God appears in the second stanza with the words "suddenly Your silence wrapped me." The "sudden" (*peta*) appearance of God's presence is experienced as being wrapped (*afafatni*) by silence, by a relaxing embrace, which soothes the inner pains. There is no fire, storm, or wind. The poet's emotional reaction to the miracle of God's presence is also minimal: "In a noisy market a bird is hopping, with a hidden song." The word "hopping" (*medada*) signifies that the movement does not amount to the spreading of wings, only to the awkward walking of a bird who cannot yet fly to the sky. This does not diminish the greatness of the miracle; it only characterizes the personal style of ecstatic happiness.

157 Bar-Miriam, *Poems*, pp. 74-75.

158 Zelda, *Poems*, p. 33.

A beautiful example of a peaceful ecstatic experience is Mordechi Georgo Langer's poem "Night's Riddle."¹⁵⁹

בְּתוֹךְ קוֹנְכִית צְחוּרָה שְׁטָה וְהָאֵגֶם כְּסוּד הַלֵּב.
 בְּדִלְחַ יָד הִיא מְשַׁלְחָה — וְנִבְּל כְּסָף כְּסָף זוֹלָף.
 וְנִפְתָּ צוֹף עֵתָה יְצוֹף לְשִׁיר אֵין-קוֹל וְשֵׁלוּ.
 וְעַב קַל בְּה נִתְקַל וְהוּא חוֹמֶק חִישׁ וְחוֹלָף.
 וְרָז לֹא אֶחְשֵׁף: הֲכִי אֶחְשֵׁב עַל יָפִי עַדִּי חוֹלָף.

Literally: "In a pure-white shell she sails and the lake is like the heart's secret./ A crystal hand she sends — and a silver lyre is dripping longings./ And juicy sweetness is floating now in a voiceless and serene song./ And a light cloud chances upon her and it quickly escapes and disappears./ And I shall not reveal the secret: whether I am thinking of the beauty while it is vanishing." This vision raises feelings of purity, clarity, nobility, sweetness, lightness and great peace of mind. Feelings of longing and of passive sweet flow and floating are also present in this poem. The uniform rhyming, in the style of Jewish religious poetry of the Middle Ages, creates a hypnotic musical monotony. Its soft effect is a result of the rhymed sounds V and F. The poem expresses intense ecstatic disembodiment, but its emotional atmosphere is of absolute inner peace, devoid of any overt excitement.

Many of the poems by Israel Eliraz (born in 1936 in Jerusalem) describe disembodiment and self-annihilation as bringing clarity of mind and a feeling of purity. A beautiful example is the cycle "A Bird."¹⁶⁰ In the third of sixteen short poems the bird, perhaps a symbol of the human ability to achieve elevation and self-annihilation while creating beauty, is uniting with "the friends." She is sitting among them and then they are sitting in her singing mouth. The bird "passes from nothing to no-nothing/ rocking between her being and disappearance." The bird becomes a void whose form is a bay, the place where the ocean retreats. Into this bay "we have put the books (...) waiting for the chaos to be cleared/ and extinguished like material./ A body is going and disappearing / in the depth of the roots."

159 Langer, *Poems*, p. 53.

160 Eliraz, *Clementa Miniatures*, pp. 19-44.

In some poems active and passive ecstasy are paradoxically united in the same mystical experience. In this case the physical activity can be performed in a state of inner passivity, or a feeling of complete inner peace can be achieved through intensive emotional process and physical activity. These emotional paradoxes are an expected part of the mystical experience, which is by definition paradoxical. An example for this is, again, Bialik's "Zohar," where the mystical experience of the child is both very active — he runs, jumps, dances and rolls on the earth together with the zephyrs — and also passive: he is swallowed by light, he is involuntarily flooded into the hectic activity around him. His ecstasy is so wild that it transforms the world into chaos, and it is so relaxed that it returns a clear and ordered face to the world. When the zephyrs appear out of the water, they stand in a "pure line," "hand in hand." They are "clear." They represent the duality of activity and clear purity.

In Alterman's "To the Elephants"¹⁶¹ ecstatic excitement goes together with clarity of mind. The poet feels that together with the childish wild game, "It is good to suddenly open a hundred eyes which were closed in your body," namely, to clearly see the hidden truth of all things. The same duality appears in Admiel Kossman's poem "The Daily [Temple's] Song for Tuesday":¹⁶² "There is God, and angels, the whole heavenly host. Everything is drunk of clarity." Here both the heavenly world and the poet are drunk and clear at the same time.

The distinction between active and passive ecstasy in modern Hebrew literature should include not only the poet-mystic, but also the heavenly world, which is generally static, but sometimes it is depicted as very active, reflecting the poet's state of mind

Joy Through Suffering

While traditional Jewish mysticism focuses on the mystical vision and refrains from giving detailed information about the worldly situation which preceded mystical ecstasy, in modern Hebrew

161 Alterman, *Poems from Long Ago*, pp.21-22.

162 Kosman, *Forty Love Poems*, p. 60.

literature ecstasy often emerges out of overcoming sorrow and depression, which are described or referred to in the poem. Descriptions of ecstasy in traditional Jewish mysticism rarely include a narrative about the personal suffering which preceded joy. More than traditional mystics, modern Hebrew poets tend to describe the process of passage from the misery of this world to the happy unity, and to include in the poem a description of the misery which preceded happiness. This radical passage from distress to happiness adds narrative and dramatic elements to the description of mystical experience. It also strengthens the effect of joy and astonishment. The result is sometimes an effect of emotional paradox, a unity of suffering and joy.

In Zelda's poem "I Am a Dead Bird," the first stanza (half) of the poem describes the poet in extreme distress, feeling helpless and dead. The second stanza describes the sudden presence of God, "Suddenly your silence wrapped me," which leads the poet to happiness and singing her "secret song." Gilboa's poem "*Bekitso Li-Mereishito*"¹⁶³ describes a surprising revelation which occurs after a long time of waiting and despair, "when belated noon sky/ is kissing an oppressed bush." The poet sees how the sky is kissing the dry, lonely bush, and an angel comes down and redeems the bush, which from now on "will not be afraid of evil." Everyday reality becomes "a divine transformation" before the poet's eyes. Pinhas Sadeh in his poem "My Head Struck Roots in the Earth"¹⁶⁴ begins the poem in the despaired tone of Ecclesiastes: "When all is lost, what else remains but merrymaking?." He feels like a clown "whose smile is mourning," telling about the blue harp which is joyfully playing inside him. He gets drunk and feels his head crowned with a laurel which a yellow spider spins for him. He hears "a song and a howl" in the well of his soul. And then "this is a **happy-after-all song**. [underlined in the original]/ For you it is assigned to be a song-dance./ Put your steps on his idea — / Come and dance my sister-bride!" The ecstatic joy in these poems is a miracle of overcoming existential depression.

Haviva Pedaia in her poem "The Moment of His Uncontainable Beauty" described the apparition of God's smile against the background of her extreme

163 Gilboa, *Poems*, vol. 2, p. 176.

164 Sadeh, *Poems*, p. 35-36.

suffering, while she was lying in her bed at night, tortured by loneliness and feelings of emptiness. Her bed seems to her like an ocean into which she is falling and drowning. She suffers from a pain of “dissection” (*bitur*), as if she is being slaughtered and sacrificed. She feels exhausted, dark, undone, empty like a bag raised by the wind, then “with a sigh it falls down.” The revelation takes place in a dream, within the weeping, out of inner change which blurs the difference between the poet and God. She begins talking while grammatically interchanging feminine (the poet) and masculine (God) genders, then the same voice says “Always in her sleep she speaks with mistakes.” Mystical unity cancels the poet’s passivity. She ceases to feel like an empty bag in the wind, now she is “undone.” Instead of drowning like a stone she becomes a powerful singer, a woman leader like Miriam, Moses’ sister: “The sleep of a stone this is all I knew/ and in it was the Song of the Sea/ and you were very thirsty so I gave you my days (*yamai*, also: my seas) as a sacrifice/ and I saw you living and enjoying/ as if you were born.”¹⁶⁵ Power enables her to overcome desertion. It does not endow her with happiness, only with the insight that she is not able to know it, only to have the small divine smile which diminishes the pain. The revelation and the joy do not happen suddenly, in one ecstatic moment, but as a process, through ups and downs of rationalistic doubts. When ecstasy overcomes the poet, she realizes that God is thirsty and that she can feed Him.

Ecstatic joy characterizes the mystical experience of poets, who otherwise describe reality as dark and full of suffering. Dalia Rabikovich’s poem “The Seasons” is an expression of joy, but the poem soon reveals that this is a non-existent joy, the joy of the beloved woman, which she can find only in her fantasy: “There’s a light which is blue, there’s a sea which is amber/ there’s a day when everything is seen as if joined (...) And great joy rises as if in a ladder./ And if a beloved man will be found there/ his glory is greater than the ram’s horns.”¹⁶⁶ The word “if” (*lu*) signifies that the whole picture is conditional and doubtful. In a similar way Yair Hurvitz described his joy as a passage from the distress of thirst during the fast to ecstatic happy elevation by means of a series of conditional phrases. The poem ends with the words “If [by] wings the earth will rise in

165 Pedaia, *From a Blocked Box*, pp. 35-36.

166 Rabikovich, *Poems*, p. 57

the trail of a scarf — / pass man-earth on this wing to collect joy.”¹⁶⁷ The ending emphasizes the active human active role which is necessary for the process. The quasi-rational structure of the series of conditional phrases is misleading, for in each sentence, the result is a contrast of the condition, thus forming a paradox. For example, “If earth is the place of death (*duma*), the earth is a wing [out] of the chasm,” namely, drowning and even dying enables flying up to heaven.

Writing as a Situation of Mystical Ecstasy

As mentioned above, in traditional Jewish mysticism the situations in which ecstasy might occur are learning the Torah, praying, and performing other religious activities. Such situations appear in modern Hebrew poems which were written by observant poets. In work of non-observant poets, ecstasy appears in situations of sudden inner freedom or sudden inner revitalization. The situation of artistic creativity, and especially of creating a poem, is often described as an ecstatic mystical situation. In modern Western culture, which grew from Romanticism, the process of artistic creativity was considered to be a supernatural human situation of spiritual elevation, beyond the regular earthly reality, which only the elected few can achieve. In Symbolist poetry the creation of art and poetry was treated as a theurgical activity: the Symbolists believed that Beauty will redeem the world and that artists will carry out this redemption. For Hebrew writers who were influenced by Romanticism and Symbolism, it was natural to see in the process of literary creativity a redemptive mystical activity, which takes place in a mood of ecstasy.

This view is implied in Bialik’s essay “Covering and Uncovering by Language” (1916). In this essay Bialik called poets “masters of *remez*, *drush vesod*,” the Hebrew words which are used for mystical interpretations of the Torah. Bialik described the creative process as a mixture or interactivity between the sacred and the profane, and as a rare glance into a dangerous “abyss,” which is — like God — something no living person can see.¹⁶⁸ In his

167 Hurvitz, *The Fate of the Garden*, p. 187.

168 Bialik, *Prose Writings*, p. 24. On mystical elements in Bialik’s “Covering and Uncovering by Language,” see Elior, “Covering and Uncovering.”

long poem “The Scroll of Fire” Bialik described the poet as one who sacrifices himself on the altar of his sacred mission: the redemption of his people and the whole of humankind. Like Jesus Christ, the poet suffers the others’ pain: “And every one’s pain was his pain, and his roar was theirs. And from his roar the cry of heaven and hell was heard, the envy of God and the storm of his wrath, the groaning of a soul dying in pangs of frustrated love and the moan of the world in the night of destruction.”¹⁶⁹

While in traditional Jewish mysticism the act of writing about the mystical experience takes place a certain amount of time after it has been completed, not together with the experience itself,¹⁷⁰ in modern Hebrew literature the ecstatic process of writing poetry is sometimes documented in the poem itself. In Yona Wollach’s poem “I Do Not Feel,”¹⁷¹ the poet, while writing a poem, loses her body. She faints and the material world loses its reality for her. She finds herself in front of an entrance gate to another world, a world of spiritual illumination. This situation supplies her with the “necessary freedom.” At the beginning of this poem it seems that freedom is necessary only for the writing of the poem, but the ending words, “and I that am,” hint that while writing, the poet created her own existence. She thus becomes God-like through writing. This is contrary to “nothing,” a word which repeats three times in the first part of this poem. While writing, the poet is aware of a paradoxical feeling, of simultaneous existence and non-existence. During the process of writing the poem her physical and material existence is being annihilated, and at the same time the poet’s spiritual self, which gives her a powerful feeling of being, is created in her. Here there is no meeting or unity with a sacred being which is external to the poet’s self, only an internal process, which brings about disembodiment and a feeling of self-creation. The transformation takes place in the poet’s passage from one “consciousness” to another. Yona Wollach described here a disembodiment whose goal is not God but a feeling of inner freedom to be achieved through writing, a feeling which the poet considered to be sacred.

169 Bialik, *Poems 1899-1934*, p. 233.

170 Ufenheimer, “Prolegomena.”

171 Wollach, *Unconsciousness Opening Like a Fan*, p. 268.

Symbolic Visions

The mystical experience can be better shared when it is communicated not by explanations about mystical principles and behavior, but by descriptions of a revelation or an appearance of wonderful visions and other unusual impressions of the senses — voices, smells, tastes, touches. Perhaps mystics really see the visions they describe. More probably, these visions and impressions are symbolic representations of the powerful experience of meeting with an abstract sacred being, which cannot be communicated by regular speech. The mystics' visions can be understood as metaphors and symbols, through which they tried to express powerful spiritual experiences. Although some of the details of the visions have clear theological meanings, they are not allegorical but symbolic, because of their complex emotional connotations. The effort to describe a mysterious non-expressible abstract reality with concrete images and symbols and to communicate the powerful feelings it arouses is a common denominator between mystical and other poetic texts, which use symbols in order to express powerful experiences. In mystical texts these symbols describe metaphysical beings and experiences. In this sense Symbolist poetry, prose fiction, drama and art are all mystical.

The concreteness of the symbols enables a vivid and authentic communication of the experience. This concrete character of the mystical image, if understood literally, is problematic in the context of theology, which emphasizes the abstractness of God,¹⁷² but this problem disappears if we understand it as an indirect — metaphoric or symbolic — means to describe the experience of contact with God. And in fact, the mystical sensual impressions are generally described in a way which invites their symbolic interpretation: not as a realistic image or event, but as a vision of supernatural reality. The details of the vision are often loaded with symbols, which have accumulated symbolic meanings through their repeated appearances in mystical texts and cultural contexts. For a reader who is acquainted with traditional mystical literature, it is not difficult to decipher the meaning of these symbols, because in traditional mysticism the theological context is clear and the symbols repeat themselves.

¹⁷² Pedaia, *The Sight and the Speech*, p. 18.

The situation in modern literature is different, because the range of symbols and the options of interpretation are wider.

Surprising as it might seem, mystical experiences of people who belong to very different cultures are represented in basically similar images. Light and water are the most conspicuous examples. An abundance of flooding supernatural light or the combination of such light with gushing forth and running water is probably the most universal and widespread symbol which represents the mystical experience.¹⁷³ This is true also of traditional Jewish mysticism.¹⁷⁴ Light is also used as a metaphor to indicate rational enlightenment, but in the mystical context light appears as a powerful, astonishing, mysterious and abundant impression, which causes surprising sensual delight. The combination of light with water is synesthetic: it is both visual and tactile.

Among the varied mystical symbols are also air, fire, storm, circular forms, the colors white, gold and azure, precious stones, voices of angelic music and singing, images and smells of flowers (rose, lily, lotus), delightful feelings of drunkenness, kissing, coupling, sucking, swallowing and drowning. The vision might include supernatural beautiful creatures, male and female, whose clothes and surroundings are kingly, and wonderful events which happen on the mystic's way to God. Some items from this list can be found in Jewish mystical traditions of various periods.

Jewish Mystical Symbols

Many of the symbols which appear in Jewish mystical texts are universal. A tiny example is Elazar Azikri's documentation of "a piece of gold, round like a flower," which he saw in his dream.¹⁷⁵ Here we find a combination of a circular form, the golden color and the flower. However, various Jewish mystical circles have created their own unique symbols,

173 Eliade, *The Two and the One*, pp. 19-77.

174 Scholem, *The Beginnings of Kabbala*, pp. 324, 351; idem, "Colors"; Idel, *Abulafia*, pp. 60-66; Helner-Eshed, *A River*, pp. 268-296, 299-367; Gottlieb, *Researches*, pp. 245-246, Pedaia, "The BESHT," p. 29.

175 Azikri, *Heavenly Words*, p. 131.

which have become part and parcel of the Jewish system of mystical symbols. Such are, for example, the symbols of *heikhalot* (temples), *pargod* (curtain), throne, crown, chariot, wheels, *shofar*, pipes, names, the Hebrew letters; the ten *sephirot*, *Adam Elyon* (Superior Man) and his ten limbs, the *sitra ahara* (the evil side) of God, garden, fountain, tree, root, the green color in the Zohar; *tsimtsum* (contraction), sparks, broken and repaired vessels in Lurianic (Tsfat) Kabbalah; king, emperor, prince, princess and their retinue, courtyard, rooms, island, ocean, boat, in Hassidism.

Modern Hebrew writers and poets who tried to transmit mystical experiences used both universal and specific Jewish traditional symbols. Even if the symbol is universal, the use of the Hebrew language leads the reader to the Jewish sources. For example, the word *zohar* means an abundance of light, which is a widespread mystical symbol, but the use of the word *zohar* in Hebrew leads the reader to the title of the most famous Jewish mystical text. Another example is the use of the word *shoshana* for a rose (instead of the current accepted word *vered*), because of the mystical symbolic connotation of *shoshana* in Kabbalah and Hassidism.¹⁷⁶

Light, Water, White, Rose, Temple, Eros

Light is the most widespread symbol in modern Hebrew mystical poetry. The examples are innumerable. They can be found in descriptions of mystical experiences in Y.L. Perets' stories "The Kabbalists" and "The Transformation of a Melody" and in Berdychevsky's story "And Then He Sang"; in Bialik's poems "My Light Was Not Unearned," "Zohar," "The Scroll of Fire" (where light is the symbol of the "good" aspect of God, and the fire the symbol of His "bad" aspect); in Ben-Yitzhak's poems "A Bright Winter," "The Mountains Which Were Joined Together Around My City," "A Psalm"; many of Alterman's "Stars Outside" poems;¹⁷⁷ Zelda's poems "When I Blessed the

176 On rose (*shoshana*) in the Zohar see Tishbi, *Zohar*, vol 1, pp. 235-236.

177 "Infinite Meeting," "A Sudden Day," "To The Elephants," "The Fire," "The Light Which is Marching from Visions of Brass," "Tamuz," "The Nakedness of Fire," "The Birth of the Street," "Here Are the Trees," "A Spring for Souvenir," "A Bright Morning."

Candles,” “Every Rose,” “Shabbat and Week Day”; Amir Gilboa’s poem “The Vision Came to Me All at Once”; Yair Hurvitz’s “Close to a Wonder We Better know,” Yona Wollach’s “The Islands of Life” and so on and so forth. In contrast to the intentionally non-realistic and non-personal depictions of light in traditional Jewish mysticism, in modern Hebrew poetry there are more detailed, more or less realistic, descriptions of light, as well as direct expressions of the personal impressions which the light makes on the poet.

Images or metaphors of light in 20th century Hebrew poetry are not necessarily mystical symbols. They can represent realistic impressions as well as physical and emotional happy experiences. Ayin Hillel’s poem “A Spring Morning”¹⁷⁸ can serve as an example. This poem describes a landscape on a spring day, full of light, with fields of wild flowers whose astonishing beauty and strong colors — yellow, red, blue and gold — fill the poet with wild excitement and happy vitality. The emotional atmosphere is ecstatic, but the vision is not mystical, because the images do not represent metaphysical reality. The realistic effect in this poem is accentuated by the use of the wild flowers’ specific names, which do not have symbolic connotations. In contrast, light in mystical poems represents a flooding feeling of redemption by deep understanding and happy acceptance of sacred, mysterious metaphysical reality, or by enabling the poet to disconnect from his “dark” life. The role of light as a symbol, whose presence in the picture of reality turns it into a mystical experience, can be clearly seen when we compare between Bialik’s twin long poems “My Poetry” and “Zohar” (these two poems were originally one long poem). Both poems deal with the autobiographical origins of Bialik’s poetry. Both describe childhood memories: “My Poetry,” memories of bereavement, poverty and stress inside the poet’s home; “Zohar,” happiness, playfulness, and the bliss of imagination when the child is in nature. The first poem depicts a realistic picture of a poor, unhappy life, while the second poem is dedicated to the redemption of the child from his unhappy reality by his imaginative abilities. The child’s imagination fills reality with mystery and sacredness, whose main manifestation is the personified sparks of light. In this case the lighted reality is completely different from the dark one.

178 Hillel, *Land of Noon*, pp. 12-13.

Yona Wollach in her poem “According to One of the Laws”¹⁷⁹ wrote about light as an element which changes the same reality into something understandable, and therefore less terrible: “Then duality itself will be understood./ And the light which radiates a halo will make everything understandable./ Like in the day of light in which everything is understandable and everything has a name so at night there are no names and understanding so in the inner hidden light everything will be understood so / (...) the parallel in nature and in the cosmos and in the soul in light everything has a name and a meaning.” In this poem the difference between the lengths of the lines and the absence of punctuation marks serve to express the flood of ecstasy.

In modern Hebrew poetry the ancient mystical connotation of light can be used for new, original, even revolutionary meanings. Chernikhovsky’s idyll “In a Hot Day” (1905)¹⁸⁰ opens with a detailed description of a summer day in Ukraine. The land and the air are flooded with light, the “superior light” touches “the inferior light,” but strangely enough this contact between the upper and the under worlds does not redeem man. On the contrary, it “chokes the soul.” The reasons for this pessimistic point of view will be understood later in the poem — prison is here (and also in Chernikhovsky’s idyll “The Broken Spoon”) a symbol of the existential human situation. Chernikhovsky, whose world view was far from mystical, here ironically used the mystical symbols of light and of unity between earth and heaven in order to create a symbolic poetic image of existential (or metaphysical) evil.

Water, a central element in the Zohar, appears in modern Hebrew poems which emphasize the dynamic character of the mystical experience and its similarities to the experience of drowning. The full revelation of sacredness occurs by the lake in Bialik’s long poems “Zohar” and “The Lake” (in contrast to the complicated meeting with the broken wing in “Alone”). In Ben Yitzhak’s poem “While Day is Declining,”¹⁸¹ sacredness appears as white flowers floating and sailing on a river. Both Pinhas Sadeh in his “I Am Coming”¹⁸² and Yair

179 Wollach, *Forms*, p. 28.

180 Chernikhovsky, *Poems*, vol. pp. 581-591.

181 Ben Yitzhak, *Poems*, p. 14.

182 Sadeh, *Poems*, p. 76.

Hurvitz in his “The Waters Are Standing”¹⁸³ reach mystical union while standing and looking at the sea, which gradually floods them and the whole cosmos. The characteristic combination of water and light can also be found in the aforementioned long poems of Bialik. Ilan Sheinfeld in his poem “Revelation”¹⁸⁴ wrote: “A revelation arrives, a revelation is off./ Like light, like water. Like love.” Symbols of sacredness here are paralleled with the human experience of love. Dalia Rabikovich’s poem “Delight”¹⁸⁵ combined images of sunlight and river water with circular forms, flowers (roses), the golden color and the day of Shabbat, thus using a variety of Jewish traditional mystical symbols in her personal, semi-autobiographical love poem.

The color white is a widespread symbol of sacredness, which is the foreground for purity, disembodiment and abstractness. Sometimes it is attached to white objects, such as the white she-cloud in Bialik’s “And If the Angel Asks” and “Scroll of Fire,” or the white flowers in Ben-Yitzhak’s “While Day is Declining.” Sometimes the white appears as the annihilation of all the other colors. For example, in Ben-Yitzhak’s poem “Happy Are Those Who Sow Without Reaping”¹⁸⁶ sacredness is the whiteness of a cloud under which the rainbow colors modestly hide and are united: “Happy are the proud ones whose pride overflowed their souls/ and became like the modesty of the white/ after the disappearance of the rainbow in the cloud.” Yair Hurvitz in his poem “Under a Fan-Shaped Canopy”¹⁸⁷ envisioned the heavenly light as an annihilation of the rainbow colors, which are spread like a deck of cards. In Yona Wollach’s “The Play of Fate”¹⁸⁸ the disappearance of all colors in to black and white represents disembodiment and mystical death, while reality is becoming abstract like God: “And the colors where are they? Where are all the colors?/ They all stand black and white/ where colors [are] colorless/ symbols of colors (...) where abstract colors/ [are] like symbols of lights and colors.”

183 Hurvitz, *The Fate of the Garden*, p. 153.

184 Sheinfeld, *The Beginning is Love*, p. 76.

185 Rabikovich, *Poems*, p. 47.

186 Ben-Yitzhak, *Poems*, p. 20.

187 Hurvitz, *The Fate of the Garden*, p. 143.

188 Wollach, *Poetry*, p. 125.

The rose and other flowers appear in poems which emphasize the aesthetic, delightful aspect of sacredness. In Zelda's "Every Rose"¹⁸⁹ the poet attributes light and a good smell to the redeeming rose, which is both an island of eternal peace and the nest of a tiny sapphire bird. In her poem "The Moon Teaches TANACH,"¹⁹⁰ flowers capture the heavenly sacredness, and through them the girl, astonished by the beauty of the TANACH, is comforted: "An anemone is hot like the Torah/ an anemone burns like a *passuk* (...) a cyclamen is fainting from the sweetness of the secret." Flowers have a powerful presence in Pinhas Sadeh's poetry. In his poem *Hitpashitut* (spreading/embodyment)¹⁹¹ he wrote: "The nuance of the rose and the nuance of the yellow will dance, the azure will praise, as if dreaming (...) The peony will praise in rose, the Jerusalem sage — in purple./ The lily, a flower delighting the soul, will dance (...) the space of the worlds is spreading out like a rose of fire and light./ And it is the rose of God, and no more roses." The first flowers which appear here are specific flowers which grow around Jerusalem, but then the traditional mystical symbols, the rose and the lily (which often appear in his early poetry), become central, the symbolic character of the flowers becoming dominant. Yair Hurvitz in his poem "To My Love, When it Rises"¹⁹² described a heavenly world where "On islands angels are resting and light/ of flowers like eyes opening walking." Here, as in Zelda's "Every Rose," the flowers are a source of the heavenly light. Yona Wollach in her poem "Over there — There Is"¹⁹³ also described the heavenly mysterious sphere as a garden with roses: "Over there — there are heavenly bodies (...) over there — there are roses." Roses and heavenly bodies are parallel here.

On the basis and as a continuation of erotic symbolism in Jewish and non-Jewish traditional mysticism, the mystical vision is often described in modern Hebrew literature as an erotic or sexual relationship between man and woman. The details of the vision in such descriptions are more detailed, realistic and concrete, and therefore it is often difficult to decide what is literal and what is

189 Zelda, *Poems*, p. 59.

190 Ibid., p. 45.

191 Sadeh, *The Book of Yellow Pears*, p. 147.

192 Hurvitz, *The Fate of the Garden*, p. 49.

193 Wollach, *Poetry*, p. 127.

metaphoric among the erotic experience or the mystical vision. As an example, let us consider Dalia Rabikovich's poem "Spots of Light,"¹⁹⁴ which describes the "Tender love between the darkness and the gold," the process of unification between the heavenly light and the dark material, or between matter and spirit, a well-known philosophical idea. The cancellation of this contrast in God is characteristic of mystical theosophy, which deals with it in a theoretical, abstract way. On this conceptual, philosophical basis, the poet creates a description of a vision which includes visual, auditory and tactile impressions. In spite of the contrast between the light and the dark material, the light arrives at the material in the form of "spots" (*ktamin*, the plural of *ketem*, which also means gold). The similar sounds of "or" (light) and "khome" (material) is here an additional stylistic means by which the similarity between the contrasts is implied.

Jewish and European Symbols

Together with symbolic images with a universal mystical tradition, we find in modern Hebrew poetry, even if written by non-observant poets, traditional Jewish mystical symbols. As mentioned above, in Amir Gilboa's poem "For Then I'll Cry"¹⁹⁵ the temple, an ancient Jewish mystical symbol for the heavenly worlds, represents a perfect situation of sacredness. The use of ancient mystical Jewish symbols characterizes Gilboa's poetry as a whole. Another example is the symbol of letters. In his poem "I am Praying from the Heart Siddur,"¹⁹⁶ Gilboa wrote: "I am praying from the heart [which is] a *siddur* whose margins were torn and all the missing words I/ see them flying already a long time they are flying/ searching rest for their feet [like Noah's dove] how/ shall I cure them and the heart/ of my *siddur* whose margins are eaten up/ exhausted and naked." In this poem the remains of sacredness in the heart of the poet are symbolized by the Jewish prayer book, and the "missing words" are what the poet misses in order to return to the lost sacredness she experienced in Jewish

194 Rabikovich, *Poems*, p. 44.

195 Gilboa, *Poems*, vol. 1, pp. 10-15.

196 Idem., vol. 2, p. 13.

religious life. Here the missing words and their letters are not manifestations of the heavenly world, but of the spiritual level of life, which disappeared from the poet's own life when he left his Jewish home in Europe.

The Hebrew letters are also symbols of sacredness also in Ruth Netzer's poem "Visions."¹⁹⁷ In this poem "Letters are flying/ asking for *tikkun*// letters in the roundabout of the ladder." God says "I am the letter./ Letters of the chariot." In Ilana Rossano's poem "The Cave"¹⁹⁸ the poet sees faces of people who are praying with ecstasy, including her own and her mother's, and the faces are undone and turn into torn pages full of letters which belong to one mysterious book.

Sometimes traditional Jewish symbols combine with symbols of clearly European extraction. For example, in Bialik's "He Peeped and Died" the details of the heavenly decoration belong to various mystical Jewish sources, but the hero of the poem holds a torch of mission, alluding to the myth of Prometheus and its continuing tradition in European literature and culture.

In Avraham Shlonsky's cycle of poems "Happy is the One"¹⁹⁹ the poet says, "The bush burnt with fire in the desert came back to me," thus comparing himself to Moses when he first heard the voice of God. The poet sees two wonderful visions, both in a forest: a galloping deer whose horns are burning, and a lily surrounded by golden thorns, burning in the darkness. The image of the deer alludes to "My beloved, be like a deer or a roe" in The Song of Songs (2:17), which has a rich tradition of mystical Jewish interpretations. However, the burning horns of the deer remind one of Russian legends such as the Bird of Fire, while the golden thorns and the lily belong to the symbolist repertoire. A forest as a symbol for a sacred space is also closer to European than to Jewish tradition.

This mixture of Jewish and European symbols can be found in poems written by observant poets as well. The experience of redemption in Zelda's poem "I Am a Dead Bird"²⁰⁰ is envisioned as being "wrapped" by God's silence. Zelda uses the word *afafatni*, which in the Bible has a pejorative meaning of danger

197 Netzer, "Visions."

198 Rossano, "The Cave."

199 Shlonsky, *Poems*, vol. 1, pp. 293-294.

200 Zelda, *Poems*, p. 33.

and death, to describe an action of protection and consolation, as if God was a prince who took her, the princess, wrapped her and whisked her away on his horse. Such a combination of Jewish and European Romantic motifs is even clearer in Gavriella Elisha's poem "Thousands of Angels,"²⁰¹ in which the experience of redemption mixes together expressions which are clearly of Jewish tradition (such as "thousands of angels are floating on me/ saying forever their mercy on me," alluding to the expression *ki le'olam hasdo* which appears many times in the Psalms and elsewhere) together with an image of a prince on a horse coming to love the poet.

Unlike in traditional mysticism, in modern Hebrew literature, following the Romantic view of mystical inspiration, the vision of God is often viewed from a child's or a young man's point of view, which is different from an adult's. Bialik in "Zohar" speaks of how as a child he could find sacredness in his broken toys, in home instruments, and in his imaginative fantasies. From a child's point of view, Alterman presented God as a child playing with his "toys,"²⁰² and himself as God's grandson,²⁰³ or a child who sees the city for the first time in his life.²⁰⁴ When he is in love with the divine cosmic being, the poet compares himself to a boy in love with a high school girl.²⁰⁵

New images represent the way or the process which leads to unity: instead of the traditional ladder or series of gates and rooms, we find in Amir Gilboa's "Birth" (see ch. 1) the image of a net in which the poet's soul is captured by God. This image emphasizes the blind, passive, non-cognitive mental situation and the power of sacredness over the poet. It is an interesting use of the spider web image, which in Decadent and Symbolist literature and painting was often used as a symbol of existential evil. In Bialik's "Zohar," the poet's soul is caught by the wonderful manifestations of sacredness in nature like a bird by a miraculous net: "And like a bird in a net my soul was caught,/ tender and soft fine golden threads / surrounded me, crawling on my pure limbs."²⁰⁶

201 Elisha, *With my Lips I Breathed Out*, p. 18.

202 *ibid.*, p. 37.

203 *Ibid.*, p. 45.

204 *Ibid.*, 132.

205 *Ibid.*, p. 113.

206 Bialik, *Poems 1899-1934*, p. 89.

Another image which is perhaps a result of Symbolist influence is the reflection of God or of sacredness in water or in a mirror. In European Symbolism, the mirror was a symbol for the illusory nature of physical reality. This image is central in Bilaik's "The Lake," where the reflection of external reality in the water of the lake, raising "the riddle of two worlds" leads to the ending scene, in which the poet, like Adam, hears the voice of God. In Gilboa's "*Bekitso Li-Mereishito*," the word *mar'ah* is used as both mirror and vision, alluding to the feminine use of the word *mar'eh* (vision, in the masculine) in Exodus 38:8, where the vision (*mar'ot*) of God surrounded the Tabernacle.

The combination of traditional with new, original metaphors is sometimes complicated and rich with meaning. In an untitled late poem by Amir Gilboa,²⁰⁷ the poet described the presence of sacredness as a vague feeling of fragmented threads, which are flying in the air, suddenly uniting and becoming a cosmic circle of energy in which the poet's "blow of the heart" is passing through like an electrical current. Gilboa combines here the modern electric circle and the ancient mystical circle, which is a universal symbol of sacred perfection. The poem ends with the words "Beyond all the languages which I knew in the mirror [or vision] from the root to the height of rainbows' [in the plural] colors/and more" (without a full stop at the end of the poem). "Languages" here are like physical objects which can be seen in a mirror, and the rainbow's colors are like the top of a big tree. Here the mirror is assembled together with the traditional Jewish mystical symbol of the divine "root."

Yair Hurvitz, in his poem "Under the Canopy Like a Fan,"²⁰⁸ described a moment of contact with sacredness and self-annihilation as the moment when a card player opens his packet of cards, making them look like a fan or a rainbow, and all the colors disappear into white. Surprisingly, the image and the exciting experience of card playing (which Yair Hurvitz was fond of) is combined here with the traditional mystical symbols of marriage, white color, a rainbow, and the cancellation of all colors in the white.

The repertoire of symbols in modern Hebrew literature is not only an original and idiosyncratic but also an astonishingly rich one. Again, Alterman's

207 Amir Gilboa, *Poems*, vol. 2, p. 82.

208 Hurvitz, *The Fate of the Garden*, p. 143.

poetry can serve as an example: his mystical vision is very rich with details which separately are very concrete, but when put together in one poem do not create a realistic image, but an effect of a fantasy or a strange dream. Alterman's visions include — beside the traditional light, stars, way, dove, marriage and white color — a circus, elephants, taverns, a female cook and a female innkeeper. The poet's yearning for God is described as the longing of a son for a father after he murders his own brother, and begins wandering the world like a gypsy with a dancing bear, not even able to write a letter to his father.²⁰⁹ The symbols often develop into a small, symbolic, mythological narrative: in his ecstasy the poet is like an inexperienced girl to whom God has given wine from his one and only cluster of grapes. Alterman compares the scarce humidity with which the olive tree manages to cut through the heart of his earth-bride to the sacred tear of God.²¹⁰ God is a mother who gives a flower to the beloved, modest, and stammering son, meeting him in the forest, where he dies.²¹¹

Realistic Details

One of the central phenomena of mystical expression in modern Hebrew poetry is the combination of specific realistic details and traditional Jewish symbols. The combination of realistic and symbolic details adds authenticity and vitality to the description of a mystical event. It also hides the mystical contents under a veil of semi-realistic documentation. Thus the poem can be understood on both levels: the realistic (often biographical) and the symbolic-mystic. This device was already used by Rabbi Nahman, in whose stories specific, semi-realistic “authentic” details are woven into the legendary symbolic text, whose heroes are kings, princes, and princesses. The same technique was taken to an extreme by Kafka in his mystical novel *The Castle*, in which naturalistic details appear throughout the symbolic story.

209 Ibid., 61-63.

210 Ibid., p. 101.

211 Ibid., pp. 142-144.

Such a combination of symbolism and realism can be found in Bialik's "Alone," in which the *Shekhina's* presence is realistically depicted. The poet can feel the *Shekhina's* hot tears on his shoulder and on his Gemara in a way which makes it both a symbol of the sacred Jewish spirit and a regular mother, whose behavior is known to the reader from his own experience.

Such a technique characterizes Alterman's long poems "Stars Outside," "The Joy of the Poor," and "Poems of the Ten Plagues," and is one of the reasons it is so difficult to understand their full meanings. The image of the mysterious woman, which appears throughout these poems, is a mystical symbol of life's sacredness, but she is also described as a regular woman, who appears on a day of holiday "her hands white, with no bracelet, white apron,"²¹² as a barmaid,²¹³ or even as having a cow's udders.²¹⁴ In Kabbalah the Heavenly world is symbolically depicted by human male limbs, but the feminine image of the *Shekhina* has no limbs. Alterman describes the erotic image of sacredness — a commonplace in traditional mysticism — with realistic details: "The heavenly virgin/ is laughing, naked ... / Kiss her, kiss her on her mouth!"²¹⁵ Even more astonishing is Alterman's description of the three brothers (symbolizing the poet's split personality), whose heart becomes pregnant (sic!) after having met the symbolic sacred virgin.²¹⁶

For Alterman not only can nature — eternal and starred or rural and folk-like — be looked at as a mystical vision in the Romantic vein, but so too can urban space, which is full of machines, metal and glass, and is often a background and a reservoir of redemptive visionary symbols. The city is described as a feminine divine being whose bridegroom is the street;²¹⁷ its fountains in the squares and even its noise are, all together, a temple in which the soul can be purified.²¹⁸

212 Alterman, *Poems from Long Ago*, p. 164

213 *Ibid.*, 140-141.

214 *ibid.*, p. 22.

215 *Ibid.*, p. 98.

216 *Ibid.*, p. 120.

217 *Ibid.*, pp. 91-94, 108-109.

218 *Ibid.*, p. 97.

Mystical visions are generally described as non-realistic, supernatural situations, but sometimes the supernatural grows from a realistic situation. For example, the story about the revelation of God to Moses from the burning bush begins with information about realistic natural facts; the heavenly world in the *heikhalot* literature grows from the memory of the destroyed temple; an impressive view of the Sea of Galilee produced a symbolic picture of the heavenly world in the Zohar.²¹⁹ In the same way, in Bialik's long poem "Zohar" the symbolic vision grows from the real experience of a child who looks at the lake on a sunny day. In Amir Gilboa's "Far Far Away at the End of a Glance,"²²⁰ the mystical vision grows from the poet's strenuous gaze at a real landscape, which is located far away, difficult to be seen too clearly. This landscape turns into a vision of a "big street going," where men and women, dressed in Shabbat clothes and holding in their hands sticks from which almond flowers are sprouting, live eternal life. The scene does not take place in heaven or in a cosmic space; it is located on earth. It is constructed from both realistic elements (a street and people dressed in Shabbat clothes) and from the supernatural symbol of the miraculously blooming dry almond branch, which alludes to Jeremiah 1:11.

Such a process of a gradual emergence of the heavenly world while the poet is looking at a real landscape can be also found in Yair Hurvitz's poem "The Edge of the Cypress and the Shadow."²²¹ The poem begins with a description of a disgusting reality: a noisy supermarket and a fat woman. Then the fat woman is seen arm-in-arm with a rosy apple. The apple "becomes blown and from its lair wild beasts are running to and fro." The poet here uses the words *ratso va-shov* to describe the running of the beasts, alluding to the angels who look like animals in Ezekiel 1:14. At this point the poet has a revelation: "And then I saw how clear it is in the city and little Lewis' hand is touching the edge of the cypress/ and my hand is on the shadow which is falling far away." This rather realistic scene develops and becomes more and more symbolic and mystic: "But always in the more distant shadow the bigger pearl waits/ to be

219 Zohar part 2, page 9a.

220 Gilboa, *Poems*, vol 2, p. 57.

221 Hurvitz, *The Fate of the Garden*, p. 43.

given in the eyes of the expectation.” In Hurvitz’s poem “Until Night”²²² the same gradual process of passage from a realistic to supernatural and symbolic scene can be found, but here it is quicker. The poem opens with the words “There is sky above me,” which are completely factual. Then the poem continues thus: “In it sits [He who is] binding clouds into crowns./ Colorful winds puff up water in homes, blowing fruit/ in festive joy.” In contrast to the simple beginning, the middle and end of the poem become more and more complicated, less and less understandable. The sky (or heaven) turn into crowns (a Kabbalistic symbol), and the blowing of the wind produces a series of synaesthetic impressions, of water gushing forth and the taste of fruit, in the tradition of the symbolic mystical visions.

In Hurvitz’s poem “Standing is the Water [The Water is Standing]”²²³ the poet is looking at the sea (an everyday view for a poet who lived in Tel-Aviv) and the sea turns into “water in a world which is wholly water.” The sea turns into a dream-like world, where colors and time are cancelled: “And non-distant distant the dream of water stands there on the water/ like a coronary lake killing color killing eyes/ and the blood of the light is standing in it like before/ morning which is always morning (...) a sea in the color of dark bronze is getting up to the blood of the light.” The sea is described here during sunset, but the details are blurred and imperceptible, they produce mysterious and ecstatic effects (“killing color killing light,” “blood of the light”), they construct paradoxes (“non-distant-distant”) and they mix together realistic details (the bronze-like color of the sea) with the traditional mystical symbols of light and water. It is difficult to construct a clear picture of the vision, because of the enigmatic language.

The everyday, realistic, down-to-earth situation which serves as a point of departure for the mystical experience can be especially interesting in women’s poetry, where the kitchen and its accessories, as well as other housework conventionally associated with women, appear in the poem as part of a mystical vision. Thus Gavriella Elisha in an untitled poem wrote: “Lengthily I was thinking about washing the floor/ and I did not (...) I could not [bear] impure water;”

222 Ibid., p. 119.

223 Ibid., p. 153.

From this point the poet turns to “delusive scenes/ and in the angels of wings were spread.”

The realistic details which are inlaid within the mystical vision are sometimes taken from contemporary Israeli reality, far beyond the frame of images which traditional mystics could have thought of. For example, Sabina Messeg in her poem “The God of Chariot”²²⁴ described mystical unity by the metaphor of fruit tree’s inoculation, a gardening action of using strong local tree (*hush’hash* for citrus trees) and inoculating on its stock a more delicate fruit tree (such as lemon), in order to improve its immunity, an action which is regularly done to citrus fruit trees, and is well known to whoever has lived in an area where orchards grow. The Hebrew word for inoculation is *harkava*, a word which can also mean “saddling.” The place where the delicate tree is combined with the strong local one is called “*ayin*” (an eye). The poem begins with the poet’s request “*tarkiv oti al etz*,” which can either mean: use me as wild tree to improve another tree, or: saddle me on a tree. The first meaning makes sense at the beginning: “Inoculate me / on a local strong tree/an eye inoculation.” Later the poet says “Inoculate me on a *hush’hash* stock, a fig stock, an olive stock, a wine-vine stock/ a heart inoculation/ saddle me / and make me gallop/ on the *makom* (spot/place/God).” The last words, *al ha-makom*, are a slang expression which means: on the spot, but the word *makom* (place) also means God, so the request here can be understood as: put me in the chariot of God and make it gallop. Messeg combined specific agricultural details, which people who live (or lived in childhood) in agricultural neighborhoods in Israel know, together with traditional Jewish mystical symbols and expressions.

The strange, modernist effect, which is achieved by the combination of sacred and profane details in the description of the vision can be sharpened when contemporaneous non-Hebrew, foreign words are used. This is the effect of the non-Hebrew word “crystal” (pronounced *milra*. The Hebrew word is *bdolakh*) in Shulamit Hava Halevi’s poem “Fiery Sparks.”²²⁵ The poem describes the heavenly world as made of “Marble! Marble! Transparent like manna / — like dew/ like a fortune-teller’s crystal/ — pure and round.” The marble

224 Messeg, “The God of Chariot.”

225 Halevi, “Fiery Sparks.”

is mentioned in the Talmud by Rabbi Akiva, speaking of the impression made by seeing the heavenly world; the manna and the dew are also traditional symbols of sacredness and purity. The fortune teller's crystal (especially when the foreign word is used) seems to be taken from completely another context of the modern New Age. It destroys the linguistic purity of the text and at the same time makes it close to reality, spontaneous and authentic. Such intervention of a foreign word in the mystical vision is even sharper in Esther Mor-Buhler's poem "You Laugh to Me."²²⁶ In the poem, God amuses the poet with *hidushei Torah* (innovative interpretation of the Torah), and she is carried up by "white fire [written] on black fire" to the heavenly temple, where she joins the work of the High Priest. Into these ancient symbols an unexpected element breaks in at the end of the poem: the poet realizes that heaven is a camouflage of the "deconstructive zoo of the human hell." This line, and especially the anti-poetic non-Hebrew word "deconstructive" which it includes, throws the whole poem from its former height to our contemporary reality, which produces a powerful effect of authenticity.

Poetic language enables one to describe the vision in words whose double meanings make the image both realistic and symbolic. Yona Wollach's poem "The Islands of Life"²²⁷ describes the way in which unity with the heavenly world gives the poet a feeling of protection. It was written when the poet was undergoing successful radiation treatments for cancer. Wollach wrote: "And whatever You are going to tell me about the irradiation/ will do me no harm." Wollach uses the word *krina* (irradiation), which is very similar to *hakrana* (radation), thus leaving open the question of whether God is telling the poet about medical treatments or about His divine light.

The passage from realism to symbolic vision sometimes starts with a description of a scene in Jerusalem or Tsfat, real places which are connected with sacredness more than any other places in Israel. Admiel Kosman in his "A Voyage to Tsfat"²²⁸ described the revelation of heavenly visions en route to Tsfat waiting in a bus station between Farud and Amirim, villages not far

226 Mor-Buhler, "You Laugh to Me."

227 Wollach, *A Wild Light*, p. 82.

228 Kosman, *We Arrived to God*, pp. 48-49.

from the city. The poem opens with an expression taken from the world of office work, “Here the hour has knocked, as they say,” referring to the duty of office workers to sign their work ticket in an automatic machine which counts their hours of work. The specific names of the villages near Tsfat and the office jargon fixes a tone which is far removed from mysticism. More such expressions are embroidered along the poem, creating a very sober, businesslike point of view (for example: “the end of the day — as people here say”). Against this non-mystical background the vision appears: “We saw two rosy chairs flying on the sky in twilight, on the mountain in front, there were two marble chairs (...) also the sky opened (...) everything, everything on the face of the earth was sky!” Gradually the exciting vision dominates the speaker, he yields to his own excitement, and his rhetoric becomes more and more ecstatic. Such a stylistic process is very effective, for it begins from a very low emotional point, where perhaps the reader is standing, and from there it can gradually take the reader with it to the utmost ecstatic height. Tsfat appears in other poems as a place of mystical revelations. Shmuel Klein in his “Then the Trembled Stones”²²⁹ described an experience he had while visiting Tsfat. The poet not only felt that he was purified and festively kingly, but also as if Tsfat was miraculously conquered, like Jericho, and became an inner kingdom for him, who was now a Biblical commander: “We were [sic] crowns after the renewed Kingdom of Tsfat and we circled it seven times/ and we were capturing Tsfat and its daughter-towns.” Shoshana Idel in her poem the “The Klezmers’ Festival in Tsfat”²³⁰ described a *klezmer* performance in Tsfat which seized the listeners with a sensation of a meeting between Jewish present and past, creating “the meeting of yearnings/ and wandering in ladders/ gathered by expectation/ waiting to the bride, for the bride, for the bride.” A mystical atmosphere is here created by the ecstatic rhetoric and the allusions to Jacob’s ladder and to the famous *piyut* for Shabbat, “Go, my beloved, to the bride,” which was written by the 16th century Tsfat Kabbalist Shlomo Alkabetz. Itamar Yazo-Kest described a voyage to the cave of Machpelah in Hebron, and how on the way God took him in His arms and

229 Klein, “Then the Trembled Stones.”

230 Idel, *The Dew Garden Bed*, p. 69.

kissed him.²³¹ The need of a sacred place, in which mystical experiences are more easily aroused, is part of traditional practical mysticism. In these poems, the sacred places arouse mystical feelings in the poet without the need to participate in a religious ritual.

The enrichment of the vision with realistic images and metaphors strengthens its emotional effect. Dalia Rabikovich's "Night's Sorrow"²³² describes a night in a deserted city in which foxes are howling. The sky and all the high objects look miserable and suffering at first: the moon is made of copper, the clouds produce vapor, the roofs and towers are tortured, and even the stars are "creeping" like insects. The whole night "Is falling into the ocean of nights." These images express an extreme emotional stress. Into this sorrowful landscape penetrates light from another world: "And the light is dancing like does' legs/ and it sprinkles like a fountain which gushes from the wall." The appearance of the doe, a traditional Jewish mystical symbol, indicates the beginning of a mystical process. The light comes together with joy and dance, lightness, abundance and vitality. Its appearance is a miracle — it is like a fountain gushing from a wall. The last metaphor uses "wall" — a more realistic detail than the legendary rock, which would connect the poem to the famous story about Moses producing water from a rock in the desert. Here the light begins to act in a non-traditional way: "and the wave [of light] is knocking down the belly of the [nights' ocean] ripples;/ and the water are piercing the terror of the depths." These words, which remind one of a rape, express the emotional power of the experience and its power to break through the boundaries of the self, bringing the poet to another world. The intimate contact between darkness and light is created out of great pain. At this point there is a revelation: the poet sees sheaves of light standing up, like the sheaves in Joseph's dream, and the stalks sing in a choir "*Shuvi nafshi li-mnukahikhi ki Adonai gamal alaikhi*" (return, my soul, to your peace, for God has rewarded you, Psalms 116:7). Identifying herself with Joseph, the dreamer-poet now is flooded by a feeling of redemption, symbolized by light, which — she now knows — lies behind the vulgar sights, including the moon: "And there is a

231 Yaaz-Kest, *Unifications*, p. 58.

232 Rabikovich, *Poems*, pp. 41-42.

moon like a beaten out copper/ And above it there is/ light white as milk/ flooding like deep salvation.” The simile “as milk” (like the “copper” of the moon) takes the image into the real, down-to-earth world, to things which every reader recognizes from his own everyday experience. The milk is the first food of every human being. It gives the light a physical quality and reflects the experience of salvation through the simple satisfaction of a well-fed baby. Copper, foxes, wall, roofs, milk — these realistic images are embroidered in the symbolic decoration, whose details are taken from the Jewish religious tradition. Without them the effect of the vision would have been much less convincing and powerful.

A Corporal Experience

The idiosyncratic details of the vision are sometimes astonishingly creative and daring, especially when mystical unity is described as a corporal, bodily experience. In Bialik’s “Zohar” the purifying experience of the child and the contact between him and the sacredness of nature is very physical. This is emphasized by, among other methods, using the word *yetsurai* (which also means creatures) for the poet’s limbs, as if they were independent creatures. The experience is described in metaphors of absorbing, drinking and swallowing the mixture of water and light. The mystical light (*noga meshumar, or shiv’at ha-yamim*) is absorbed by *atsameikha*, a word which means not only “your bones,” but also “your deepest self,” like “bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (Genesis 2:23) or “there is no peace in my bones because of my sin.” (Psalms 38:4) The mystical light is a drink or a food which enters the poet’s bones and his innermost self. Bialik succeeded here in transmitting both the powerful, bodily feeling of the child and the spiritual depth of his experience.

Uri Zvi Greenberg’s poem “*Hizdaharut*” (becoming full of *zohar*, sacred brilliance)²³³ opens with a description of the poet’s ecstatic enlightenment and cosmic anointment. The poet feels that his body has become a temple made of

233 Greenberg, *Poems*, vol. 1, p. 85. The poem is included in his collection of poems *The Rising Masculinity*, published in 1926, two years after his *aliya* to Eretz-Israel.

glass, full of light, with a golden dome in the center of which there is a tattoo of a rose, which is at the same time God's eye. The poet's body becomes God's dwelling, the temple, which is a symbol of the heavenly world. God is to be found in the poet's body! The poet finds the reason for this inner enlightenment in his ability to participate in the Zionist redemption of Eretz-Israel: "A great enlightenment in the body — I am such a Jerusalemer! From my ribs also the light sings for the Messiah." The poet is astonished to discover the corporal source of his mystical experience: "Is that the source of my light? — answer me, God of my father in Zion!"

Dalia Rabikovich in her "Spots of Light"²³⁴ described the "tender love" between matter and spirit as a very sensual experience, using the senses of sight, hearing, touch and smell in order to communicate extreme feelings of tenderness, peace, abundance and infinity. Both the light and the dark matter "pour out like fragrances"; they both melt, flow and aromatize. The spots of light, symbols of sacredness, become liquid; the light "is dripping," it is "pouring out and flowing like myrrh oil from the *pakh* (jug)." Light becomes fragrant oil (mentioned a few times in the Song of Songs). The word "*pakh*" is, on the one hand, an everyday Hebrew word for a tin jug in which oil is kept. On the other hand, this is a reference to the miracle of Hanuka, when one small tin of oil was enough to light the Temple eight days. Thus this word unites the realistic and the mythic levels. The spots of light flow on the darkness and discover in it "a small fountain" and "a mine of gold" not known to itself before. The material now discovers its own richness, which was hiding in its depths, and thus it is transformed from a sterile darkness to a fountain of life. This discovery is corporal: "And this darkness turns the body to a well for the spots of light." The whole process is described in words which delicately hint to the bodily reactions of a woman for whom love is a miraculous redemption. Dalia Rabikovich's use of synaesthetic expressions strengthens the effect of sensual, non-cognitive impressions.

In his cycle of poems "*Ki Hu Yif'at Ha-Kol*" (For He is the Beauty of All)²³⁵ Ilan Sheinfeld combined negative mysticism and powerful sensual-

234 Rabikovich, *Poems*, pp. 44.

235 Sheinfeld, *Tashlikh*, pp. 62-67.

ity. In these poems the poet's body is a mediator between the earthly and the divine. Sheinfeld described his body as "a pipe to attract an abundance of light," using the ancient symbol of "pipe," the source of which is "Chasm to chasm calls to the voice of Your pipes, all Your surfs and waves have passed over me" (Psalms 42:8). Sheinfeld wrote about his *body*: *Ki hu kabbal ve-hu ha-Kabbalah. Ve-hu ha-mekubbal ve-ha-mekabbel*. The words "kabbala" and "mekubbal" (kabbalist) are used here both in the mystical context and in their primary meaning, as active and passive verbs deriving from the root KBL (to receive) denoting the body's reception of food, drink and semen. Thus the poet blurs the borders between elementary bodily actions and traditional established mysticism. For Sheinfeld, the bodily functions and the poetic creativity are channels which enable unity between the earthly and heavenly levels of being.

The mystical vision is sometimes described by means of food and drink metaphors. Itamar Yaoz-Kest described the contact with God using a simile of drinking alcohol and of being tattooed: "As if someone is pouring burning spirit into my mouth/ and I am in the inflaming around me room (...) four letter are flaming, uniting the real with the real/ - this is the upper tattoo -." ²³⁶

In Rivka Miriam's poem "The God of the Pears"²³⁷ the world and humanity are pears which God eats: "The God of pears swallowed his pears/ and as they were being swallowed they saw that they are in His image/ that they have never had a body/ they only seemed to be pears/ golden, whose hymen is torn./ The God of pears swallowed his pears/ and as they were being swallowed he felt his pearness incarnated / in the scaled skin which limits Him/ and makes a borderline for Him." Against the traditional symbol of unity as drowning or being swallowed in the eternal space or ocean, and also against the myth of the forbidden fruit of God, which was eaten by Eve and Adam, here the poet compares people to fruit which God likes to eat. The fruit is specifically pears, maybe because of the similarity between the form of a pear and a woman's body. The poet dares to describe the exact sensual feelings of God while eating

236 Yaoz-Kest, "Preparations," p. 7.

237 Rivka Miriam, *From the Stone Mothers' Songs*, p. 30.

pears. When speaking of the pear's skin, Rivka Miriam uses the word *klipa*, which is a mystical symbol of the metaphysical evil. The eating of the pears makes the "eaten" human being conscious of his Godly image; it also makes God conscious of his closeness to humanity. The relations between the human mystic and God are completely symmetrical. The description is simultaneously concrete and symbolic. In her poem "It Was That Angel,"²³⁸ the poet is trying to teach a baby angel to "bite carefully" food and time, while he teaches her "lucidity." In her poem "Let Me Lick the Sky"²³⁹ the poet says that she wants to "lick the sky which has run away from the pond," namely, she yearns for an authentic, semi-physical contact with the manifestations of God, even if they are hidden in a mire. In her poem "*Ha-Hester Be-Gilufin*" (The Concealed [Face of God] is Drunk)²⁴⁰ the poet personifies the abstract notion of the concealment of God, and finds it in down-to-earth things, such as a pond or notice boards. She refers to it with adjectives such as "*saru'akh, megamgem u-menakher*" (overhanging, stammering and snoring), thus making the image of God awkward and funny, but completely human and touchable.

Coherent and Incoherent Vision Scenes

In the Bible, scenes of God's revelation, such as the revelation of God to Moses in the burning bush or the revelation of God to Isaiah (ch. 6) or to Ezekiel (ch. 1), although they are not realistic, are coherently told. One can paint or stage them. In contrast, in the *heikhalot* literature and in the Zohar, the heavenly world and the way which leads to it are generally described with a collection of details which can hardly be organized into a coherent scene. This might be a result of the effort to communicate impressions which were simultaneously experienced by the mystic.²⁴¹ The incoherence of the visual scene, even when the rhetoric is not ecstatic, strengthens the effect of speech about events which were so intensively experienced that they became ineffable.

238 Rivka Miriam, *And the Jew is Resting*, p. 79.

239 Idem, *I Drowned in the Windows*, p. 34.

240 Ibid., p. 30.

241 Pedaia, *The Sight and the Speech*, p. 32.

The first modern Hebrew writers and poets, who at the beginning of the 20th century tried to describe mystical experiences, were influenced by Symbolist literature. The descriptions of the heavenly world and the way to it in Kabbalah and Hassidism seemed to them close to European Symbolism. Symbolist art, in spite of its deviation from Realism, did not crush or fragment the coherence of the mystical scene, but created non-realistic symbolic scenes whose parts belong to one frame and to one successive narrative. Modernist aesthetic conventions, however, opened the possibility of creating images and narratives from parts and fragments which do not create a coherent scene or narrative. Such conventions enable a mimesis of extreme psychological situations, which produces a non-understandable discourse. During the 20th century the non-coherence of the scene became widespread in world literature and art, so it is not surprising that non-coherent mystical visions can also be found in mid- and late 20th century modern Hebrew poetry. Such poems demand from the reader a greater effort than poems which were written during the early 20th century.

A comparison between “Still the Melody Returns” and “Infinite Meeting,” the two poems which open Alterman’s “Stars Outside,”²⁴² can help us see the difference between coherent and incoherent scenes of vision. In the first poem we see a wanderer preparing for a very long trip. We see a cloud and a tree, stormy weather, a sheep and an *ayelet* (a doe or a morning star). The wanderer remembers trees in the rain and a laughing woman. The *ayelet* here is, perhaps, the only non-realistic detail (because of its symbolic connotations), but whether we interpret it as a doe or as a star, it can fit in the nature scene through which the wanderer is passing. “Infinite Meeting,” in contrast, includes details and characters which belong to different places and even to different historical periods, so it is not possible to grasp the scene in one frame of reality. At its center there is a poor wanderer, who wishes to be accepted by an anonymous woman who lives in a castle, surrounded by a closed wall and a garden. The wanderer’s mission is commanded by “his God.” The scene also includes sheaves of wheat, books, the moon and stars, a sycamore tree (characteristic of Tel-Aviv), a theater, a street in twilight, a

242 Alterman, *Poems from Long Ago*, pp. 7-8.

Jewish mother singing a lullaby to her baby, almonds and raisins, a military march in a mercantile city, and chariots. These details hardly belong to one story, even if it is not realistic. The connection between them lies in their symbolic meanings.

A clear example for a coherent symbolist visionary scene is the meeting of the “clear-eyed boy” with “Morning Star” at the end of chapter 6 in Bialik’s “The Scroll of Fire.”²⁴³ It is not realistic, but the narrative line is clear: while looking at the water the boy tells his life story to the reflection of the naked girl, and when he raises his eyes he sees that the reflection in the water has disappeared, but instead Morning Star is shining above him, and he understands what his sacred mission is. This insight is described in the poem as an ecstatic mystical experience: “and an utter yearning came on the boy, and love for God, greater than death, flooded his heart with its ocean of yearnings. And with his eyes he drank the azure of heaven and became drunk.”²⁴⁴

Pinhas Sadeh’s poem “Six Lines — The Arab Flute”²⁴⁵ is also a coherent scene of vision: “In my dream I saw scales and I knew that on one of the scales lies the world./ And I saw the other scale, but my eyes could distinguish nothing./ And I saw that the second scale overbalances [the other], but I did not know how to interpret it.” This vision, which uses symbols from the tradition of apocalyptic literature (see ch. 7), is also not realistic (the whole world lies on a scale!), but also not difficult to visualize in the frame of one picture.

In contrast, Shlonsky in his poem “Captivity”²⁴⁶ (see above in this chapter) constructed a vision from various symbolic details which do not form a coherent scene: “I went out shameful — but a miracle has happened: I met a persecuted deer — and his two horns: fire./ I saw a lily burning in the darkness,/ and golden thorns around her: secret!/(...) The burning bush was given back to me and he is hot like a wound (...) and light was shining over me, my God, like peaceful sea./ Please send me like a ferry to the shore/(...) We all like dust from wing of butterfly/ are shaken off.” The scene includes a

243 Bialik, *Poems 1899-1934*, pp. 231-232.

244 *Ibid.*, p. 232.

245 Sadeh, *Poems*, P. 166.

246 Shlonsky, *Poems* vol. 1, pp. 293-294.

deer whose horns are made of fire, a lily burning in the darkness, surrounded by golden thorns, the burning bush and light, and on the metaphorical level a wound, the sea, a ferry, and dust shaken off the wings of butterflies. This collection of details does not belong to the same scene; it is quite difficult to construct something coherent. The same is true of the metaphors, and also about the relation between the metaphorical level and the symbolic images: there is no visual connection between them, and they are connected only by their symbolic meaning.

The difficulty in reconstructing a coherent scene in poems which describe mystical visions sometimes derives not only from the “crazy” combination of details, which prevent the reader from constructing a coherent scene, but also from a seemingly “crazy” selection of words and expressions, whose aim is to create effects of ecstasy. This phenomenon, unfortunately, cannot be examined here due to the nature of poetic translations.

Summary

In conclusion, Hebrew poetry which was written in the 20th century described mystical experiences which from the emotional point of view were similar to traditional religious mystical experiences. The main cluster of elements characteristic of mystical experience — the feeling of unity with a sacred being, ecstasy and symbolic visions — can be found in these texts. Modern Hebrew literature, while taking the description of the mystical experience to new, daring directions, continued and developed traditional Jewish elements. The mystical experience in modern Hebrew poetry is often more concrete, realistic, corporal, and intimate, and also more vivid and authentic than traditional Jewish mystical experience. The exchange of roles between man and God is more daring. Like traditional Jewish mysticism, this poetry expresses hesitation and fear of the dangers of ecstasy and disconnection with reality. In contrast to traditional Jewish mystical texts, this mystical poetry expresses doubt and despair over the possibility of reaching unity with God and also describes, sometimes in great detail, the depressing biographical and social reality from which the mystical experience redeems the poet.

Like traditional Jewish mystics, modern Hebrew poets describe a spiritual experience whose central characteristics are disembodiment, disconnection from material needs, and spiritual elevation which feels like unity with sacredness. Spiritual delight and feelings of joy, beauty, love and awe are common to traditional and modern Hebrew mystical experience. However, there is often a serious difference between the explicit mystical goals: in many modern Hebrew poems the mystical unity is not with the Jewish God, and perhaps not with God at all, but with something which the poet feels as a sacred Being. The modern Hebrew mystical experience sometimes includes, aside from disembodiment and spiritual delight, feelings of return to childhood, of aesthetic pleasure, and of total freedom. Ecstasy is part of the experience, but it arises not only during the study of the Torah or religious rituals, but also in nature, play, love, and poetry writing. Mystical ecstasy in modern Hebrew literature is more personal and autobiographical than in traditional Jewish mysticism.

Like traditional Jewish mystics, modern Hebrew poets have visions. They describe their mystical experiences in visual, auditory, and other sensory impressions. They use Jewish traditional symbols as well as symbols from non-Jewish literature, especially Romantic and Symbolist. The symbolic vision is often embroidered with specific realistic and corporal details. These idiosyncratic details of the vision, together with original metaphors and similes, make the description of vision original and authentic. The modern system of poetic devices supports the effort to describe the mystical experience in a convincing and impressive way.

CHAPTER FOUR

Self-Annihilation and Death as Mystical Goals

Attraction to Death as a Mystical Experience in Various Cultures

The belief that death is a situation of purity and of happy unification with the divine world is common to various religions and cultures.¹ The idealization of death can stem from the idea that God exists in a world which is located beyond or above the terrestrial world. Death, therefore, is seen as a passage from the terrestrial world to the world of God. It can also stem from a belief in the eternity of the soul, according to which death is an opportunity for a renewed earthly life. Many mystical teachings view self-annihilation as a religious goal which can be achieved by simulation of death or even by real death, sometimes without a clear distinction between the two.² According to this view, death is the climax of the process of mystical ecstatic union with sacredness. Denying the importance of terrestrial life and of physical needs is a central value of mystical life in general, and from this elementary presupposition it is not difficult to sense an underestimation of the value of life in contrast to the high value of death. The extreme version of this idea leads to the cultivation of asceticism and attraction to death.

Self-annihilation is sometimes considered to be the essence of mystical experience.³ From a point of view which includes Jewish and Christian mysticism only, Gershom Scholem wrote that the mystic's "way of death" is theoretical. He argued that even if the mystic experiences absolute freedom which makes him feel as if he passed into another world, in fact he continues to live and act

1 Culianu, "Ascention"; Nugent, *Mysticism and Death*, pp. 42-51; Collins and Fishbane, *Death*.

2 Nudget, *Mysticism and Death*, p. 42; Nudget examines annihilation as a way of life and as part of "negative" theology in Christian, Sufi, Buddhist and Hindu mystical teachings, not in Judaism.

3 Heiler, *Prayer*, pp. 161-240; Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, pp. 138-142.

in the terrestrial world and in a social context, although under a permanent tension. Scholem agreed that the mystic's point of departure is an extreme rejection of terrestrial life, which motivates the "revolutionary" character of every mystical outbreak. The adaptability of mystical teachings and movements to life depends, according to Scholem, on the extent of their conservatism, namely, the extent of the mystics' readiness to adapt to the relevant cultural-religious context.⁴ Mircea Eliade views mystical rituals of simulated death as a variation of rituals whose goal is a change of identity and a new birth. In other words, the rituals demonstrate the acceptance of death in order to approve and encourage life.⁵

Cultural variations influence the different versions of these rituals and the extent of the mystical attraction to death. A positive attitude to real death as a way to religious redemption is conspicuous in Tibetan Buddhism and in Japanese Zen-Buddhism.⁶ The Japanese genre of "death poems" cultivates acceptance and love of death. In this context indifference to death, as to life, is a mystical goal, and calm suicide is considered a beautiful, heroic deed.⁷

In contrast, suicide is considered to be a crime in monotheistic religions. In Judaism only *kiddush ha-shem* and in Christianity only martyrdom are expressions of love and devotion to God; according to certain versions they even bring one to paradise.⁸ However, in Sufism voluntary joyful death is a religious goal in itself, a testimony to a person's pure love of God.⁹ The Sufi who is a real lover of God should give up his soul "with a smile, like a rose."¹⁰ Spiritual annihilation is one of the central factors of the Sufi mystical expe-

4 Scholem, "Mysticism and Society," pp. 15-16.

5 Eliade, *Yoga*, pp. 272-274, 362-363.

6 On death in Tibetan Buddhism see *Evan-Wents, The Tibetan Book of the Dead*; Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy* pp. 169-171. On death as unification with Buddha in Japanese Zen-Buddhism see Hoffman, *Japanese Death Poems*, pp. 21-22, 29, 43.

7 Hoffman, *ibid.*, pp. 48-50. On *sadhana* in Yoga and Tantrism see Eliade, *Yoga*, pp. 262-263, 362-363.

8 Yovel, "Revenge and Curse."

9 Valiudin, *The Quranic Sufism*, pp. 13-16; Arberry, *The Doctrine of the Sufis*, pp. 112-114, 120-132; Redtke and O'Kane, *The Concept of Sainthood*, pp. 146-147; Sviri, *The Taste of Hidden Things*, pp. 209-221.

10 Schimmel, *The Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, pp. 130-148.

rience.¹¹ Here the saying “Die before you die” is a direction for a way of life which cancels out inferior human traits and helps a person achieve spiritual resurrection and contact with the spirit of God.¹² The attraction to death is a central theme in the poetry of Rumi (Jalal ad-din Muhammad Balkhi 1207-1273), the most important Sufi poet.¹³

In early Christianity (which was still connected to Judaism) Jesus’ death was intended to bring other people, not him, nearer to God, and while his death was on the path toward his resurrection, in later Christianity a purifying suffering as a sacrifice to God is a central idea.¹⁴ Jesus’ life and death are the superior model for worthy Christian life: “He that saith he abideth in him ought himself also so to walk, even as he walked” (1st John 2:6. see also Matt 11:29, Phil 2:5, 1st Pet 2:21). Death as a way to unity with Jesus clearly appears in Paul’s words “For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ” (Philippians 1:23). The image of Jesus dying on the cross is a pillar of the Christian ritual. Death by martyrdom is *imitatio Christi* (an imitation of Jesus).¹⁵ This idea implies a view of death as itself sacred. While Jewish religious law considers the dead body impure and sees it as causing impurity to its neighborhood, Christianity encourages physical closeness to the representation of Jesus’ dying body, and the symbolic kissing, eating and drinking of his flesh and blood. Christianity values martyrdom and self-sacrifice as a way of life. The readiness to suffer for truth is considered a testimony of real belief. “Dying unto oneself” is a positive term for the Christian voluntary annihilation of the wish for life.¹⁶ Yearning for death can be found in the writings of many Christian mystics — Augustine, Theresa of Avilla, Julian of Norwich, Saint John of the Cross, John Bunyan and others.¹⁷ During the Middle Ages self-annihilation was a necessary part of the Christian mystical experience

11 Sells, “Bewildered Tongue.”

12 Sviri, *The Taste of Hidden Things*, p. 13.

13 See, for example, his poem in Sviri, *ibid.*, p. 210.

14 Flusser, “*Kidush ha-shem*,” pp. 61-62.

15 On death as a Christian ideal in Christianity see Ornet, *RASHAZ*, pp. 30-31.

16 Arielly, “Sacred Heroes,” pp. 7, 15.

17 Nudget, *Mysticism and Death*, pp. 20-23.

for both men and women.¹⁸ A cult of sacred martyrs was popular in Western Christian culture at the time,¹⁹ while in the 16th century the Reformation movement created a whole fashion of martyrdom.

Attraction to Death in Russian Culture

Mystical Russian sects led an ascetic and even suicidal way of life, sometimes culminating in collective suicides. This extreme asceticism was perhaps influenced by Byzantine, and also by Far Eastern, traditions. Tibetan mysticism includes the belief in the human ability to pass into another world by damaging one's own body or committing suicide.²⁰ Among the *Raskol'niki* — who in the 17th century became a separate mystical sect in Russia — suicide by fire, drowning and self-poisoning was common;²¹ the *Raskol'niki* believed in the purifying power of fire and in self-burning as a way to sacred self-sacrifice, viewing voluntary death as superior to natural death. This method of suicide became more frequent in Russia towards the end of the 17th century, after Empress Sophia decreed the sect illegal in 1684. It continued to appear during the first half of the 18th century, such as when a group of *Raskol'niki* burnt themselves in one of the monasteries in Mezen'. The *Raskol'niki* also killed themselves by self-burial and by their custom of experiencing 40 days of hunger in the forest. They called self-choking by a red pillow "The Red Death" or the "Glorious Death." This tradition was probably a remnant from a pre-Slavic cult, in which a person was supposed to voluntarily "go to another world," and whoever did so received a more beautiful funeral than those who died naturally, and was also considered to be one of the family's patriarchs.²² Extreme

18 McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, pp. 154-155, 199-200, 247-265.

19 Fontaine, "The Practice of Christian Life."

20 Michels, *A War With the Church*, pp. 308-333; Andreev, *The Schism and Its Meaning*, pp. 263-293.

21 Crummery, *The Old Believers*, pp. 47-57.

22 Veletskaja, "Forms of Transformation"; Zenkovskii, *Russian Old Believers*; Klibanov, *History of Religious Sects*.

asceticism, including self-flagellation and self-castration, was common in other Russian sects which grew from Russian Orthodox soil.²³ Names of Russian sects which split from the Raskol'niki testify to their attraction to extreme asceticism and to self-damage: *morel'shchiki* (torturers of the flesh), *samosozhigateli* (those who burn themselves), *khlesty* (those who flagellate themselves), *skoptsy* (those who castrate themselves), *deto'ubiitsy* (those who kill their children), *sokratitel'shchiki* (those who shorten their lives). Among these sects it was also common to distance one's self from terrestrial life in old age as an expression of the acceptance of death, and to voluntarily leave home in order to die of hunger and cold on a high mountain, preferably while standing (this method of self-torture was called *stolpenchistvo*, from *stolp*, a pillar). During the 19th century, the religious custom of preparing oneself for death while on pilgrimage, and being buried on the way to the pilgrimage's destination, became popular in Russia. Asceticism and self-torture continued in Russia during the period of the Revolutions.²⁴

Attraction to suffering is sometimes considered a Russian trait. Dostoevsky wrote that the deepest spiritual need of the Russian people is suffering.²⁵ A modern scholar has tried to prove that Russian culture has always encouraged masochism.²⁶

Death in Jewish Tradition

Ancient Judaism rejected the sacredness of death and the devotion to bereavement. This is clear from Biblical laws about the impurity of the dead body and whoever comes to contact with it (Numbers 19:14) and from the laws of bereavement in the *Mishna* (*Moed Katan*, ch. 3). This rejection is also reflected in the *mishnaic* law of *likut atsamot* (collection of bones), according to which a year after a person's death his relatives should

23 Michels, *A War with the Church*, pp. 308-333.

24 Etkind, *Sects*, pp. 133-145.

25 Dostoevskii, *Complete Works*, vol. 21 pp. 36-38.

26 Rancour-Laferrier, *The Slave Soul of Russia*.

re-bury his bones and stop all bereavement rituals. This law was still relevant in the Middle Ages (*Shulhan Aruch, Yoreh De'ah* item 403).

These religious laws are based on the idea that the living human being was created in the image of God,²⁷ which means that the soul supplies the human body with sacredness as long as it is alive, and that contact with God is conditioned on life, not on death, as said in the Jewish Morning Blessing:

My God, the soul which you have placed within me is pure. You have created it, You have formed it, You have breathed it into me, and You preserve it within me. You will eventually take it from me, and restore it within me in Time to come. So long as the soul is within me, I offer thanks to You, Lord my God and God of my fathers, Master of all works, Lord of all souls. Blessed are You Lord, who restores souls. Blessed are You Lord, who restores souls to dead bodies.

In the Bible, descriptions of communication between man and God after death do not appear. The sacrifice of animals was intended to substitute for self-sacrifice and to prevent human sacrifice.²⁸ The ascension to heaven of a selected few, such as Hanoah and Eliahu, happened before their deaths.

In the Bible, voluntary self-sacrifice does not characterize ideal men or women. The altruistic suffering of God's slave in the 2nd book of Isaiah, chapters 53 and 54, which was adopted by Christianity, refers to the suffering of the Jewish people, not to individual suffering. The story of Isaac's sacrifice expresses opposition to human sacrifice as a way to serve God. In reference to the Day of Atonement, while one should "torture his own soul" (Leviticus 23:27) and the avoidance of this self-torture should be severely punished (*ibid.*, 29-30), the word "soul" implies that the fast was not intended to hurt or damage the body. (Nowadays, for example, sick people are exempt from the fast.) Sacredness in this context is attributed to the reading of the Torah (*ibid.*, 24), not to the physical torture, which together with the total rest (*shabbaton*) is intended to atone for sins and to prevent them from being repeated. It is intended, in other words, to lead to the cultivation of human moral sacredness on earth.

27 Loberbaum, *The Image of God*. Loberbaum examines the Mishnaic laws as deriving from the principle of man being made in the image of God.

28 Liebes, "God's Love and Envy."

The value which Judaism attributes to *kiddush ha-shem* (martyrdom) and to the rejection of life's pleasures was the product of the Hellenistic period. It was born in a multi-cultural climate which gave rise to a variety of theological and philosophical views according to which earthly life is evil. However, the negation of earthly life penetrated and developed in Judaism only in the Middle Ages, under the influences of Christianity and Islam.²⁹ No organizations whose goal is to encourage ascetic life (such as monasteries) have been founded in Judaism, even in periods when ascetic life was encouraged.

Jewish mystical teaching was in general more moderate, sane and "normal" than other mystical teachings, in the sense that it did not encourage disconnection from life. In the Talmud one can find warnings against the dangers of "entering into the *pardes*" or "descending the chariot," together with a consciousness of the illusory seductions of a more beautiful world than ours.³⁰ Kabbalists and Hassidic thinkers warned against ascetic over-devotion to God and recommended that people pray, study and live with joy.³¹ The Jewish mystic is expected to change reality by carrying out the *mitzvot*, not to be indifferent to the earthly world.³² Mystical activity in Judaism, in contrast to the more ascetic and spiritual activities characteristic to Christian, Islamic and Far Eastern mysticisms, is based on the fulfillment of religious laws, which oblige elementary commitment to family and society, while in a mental state of contemplation (*kavana*). The Jewish mystical experience is a temporary situation, which does not prevent one from returning to full religious and social activity, called *avoda be-gashmiut* in Hassidism.³³ The Jewish mystic does not annihilate his individual soul even in a situation of full unity with God.³⁴

The idea of *kiddush ha-shem* (martyrdom) was probably created in the period of the Hasmoneans.³⁵ At that time it was understood not as a way to

29 Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions*, pp. 135-136; Yovel, "Two Nations," pp. 151-168.

30 Idel, *New Perspectives*, pp. 85, 90.

31 Shohat, "On Joy in Hassidism."

32 Gottlieb, "The Theological Element." In contrast see Idel, *New Perspectives*, p. 88.

33 Idel, "Universalization and Integration," pp. 40-50; Elior, "Between Disembodiment," Wertheim, *Laws and Manners in Hassidism*.

34 Idel, *ibid.*, pp. 51-57.

35 Flusser, "Kidush ha-shem," p. 61.

achieve contact with God but as a means of atonement for the people's sins or as a method of accelerating national redemption. At that time, normative Judaism did not support martyrdom, the original literal meaning of which was: a behavior by which the greatness and sacredness of God will be demonstrated. Jewish martyrdom in the period of Hadrianus was probably created under the influence of Christian martyrs in Alexandria. However, even in this era many Jewish Rabbis preferred to accept the persecution laws rather than die as martyrs.³⁶ In the period of the Spanish Inquisition as well, the choice of martyrdom by Jews was exceptional; the majority of the Jews saved their lives by escaping or by baptism.³⁷ During the Middle Ages, martyrdom became a value and a practice only among Ashkenazi Jews during the Crusades, perhaps as a result of its value in Protestantism,³⁸ and later among Eastern European Jews during the persecutions of 1648-1649.

Despite their warnings against voluntary disconnection from life, Jewish thought and practice include not only a positive attitude toward martyrdom,³⁹ but also expressions of a positive stance toward self-annihilation and voluntary death, which are considered situations of religious climax and contact with God. Such expressions can be found in the poetry of Rabbi Yehuda Halevi⁴⁰ and in Jewish philosophical thought and mysticism, especially in the writings the Tsfat Kabbalists Elazar Azikri and RAMKHAL (Kordovero).⁴¹ Liebes argued that the ambivalent attitude toward self-sacrifice to God is characteristic of Jewish thought, from the Bible and throughout Jewish mysticism, in which death is "an ideal utopia," intended for the chosen few only. It was forbidden for the regular community because of the Rabbis' concern for Judaism's continued existence.⁴²

36 Herr, "The Persecutions."

37 Roth, "Religion and Martyrdom."

38 Arielly, "Sacred Heroes"; Shohat, "Jewish Martyrdom."

39 A bibliography on this theme can be found in Loewenthal, "Self-Sacrifice of the Zaddik," note 45, p. 484.

40 See, for example Halevi's poem "To the Fountain of True Life," Shirman, *Hebrew Poetry in Spain and Province*, vol. 1 p. 516.

41 Fishbane, *The Kiss of God*.

42 Liebes, "God's Love and Envy," pp. 32-36.

In fact, the idea that death is the climax of religious life can be found in Talmudic writings. It is reflected in the concept of *mavet binshika* (death in a kiss);⁴³ in the saying “he who wishes to love should kill himself”;⁴⁴ in the midrashic interpretation of “And you should love God with your whole heart and your whole soul” (Det 6:5), and in “And for You we were killed the whole day” (Psalms 44:23); as well as in the understanding of prayer (especially the *shema*) as a substitute of sacrifice and a sign of readiness to die for God. Death as a situation of happy unity with God appears in *midrashim* which deal with the story of the reception of the Torah on Mount Sinai. In this context there is a debate over whether contact with God is necessarily conditioned on death, with references to the Heikhalot literature.⁴⁵

Ecstatic death as a moment of unity with God is discussed in early Kabbalah and in the Zohar.⁴⁶ In the Zohar the experience of unity with the *atika kadisha*, which is the most extreme mystical situation, is described as a border situation between drowning in death and fertilization, which entails pregnancy and the beginning of new life.⁴⁷ Rabbi Shimon Bar-Yokhai’s death is described in the Zohar as a climax of unity which brings about the *tikkun* (repair) of the *Shekhina* and a recreation of the world.⁴⁸ “Death in a kiss” as a situation of *dveikut* (unity) with God is in the Zohar a desired method of departure from the world.⁴⁹

Idel wrote that it was the early 14th century Kabbalist Menahem Recanati who added the idea of a spiritual “death in a kiss,” which he had found in the Gerona Kabbalah, to the idea of real death as a result of *dveikut*.⁵⁰ The Zohar includes directions of carrying out the *shema* prayer and the *nefilat apayim* (falling and lying down) as a spiritual and physical simulation of real death

43 On the origin of this expression see Liebes, “The Messiah of the Zohar,” note 3-1, p. 174.

44 Albek, *Mishna*, Tamid p. 32.

45 Chernus, *Mysticism in Rabbinic Judaism*, pp. 58-73.

46 Idel, *New Perspectives*, pp. 142, 146, 148-149.

47 Hellner-Eshed, *A River*, p. 410.

48 Liebes, “The Messiah of the Zohar,” pp. 174-180, 192-194.

49 *Zohar* part 3 p. 144a-b. See also Eshed-Helner, *A River*, pp. 355-357; Oron, “Ars Poetica in the Zohar.”

50 Idel, *Recanati*, pp. 142-151.

through complete devotion, in a way which enables the one praying to unite the *sephirot* and reach ecstatic unity. This is a way which can lead to real death according to the ARI's warnings.⁵¹ Other Kabbalists describe *dveikut* as a situation of self-annihilation, by metaphors of being swallowed, drowning, death and "poverty" (in the sense of death).

Kiddush ha-shem is very important in Kabbalist and Hassidic thought, not necessarily meaning death as resistance to religious persecutions, but as a climax of devotion to God.⁵² The idea that killing the body while it is alive is the supreme goal of religious life and the way to resurrection of the spirit and to redemption was popular among the Kabbalists who lived in Tsfat during the 16th century, not long after the immigration of Jews from Christian Spain in 1492. Rabbi Yosef Caro's (1484-1575) work, *Magid Meisharim*, is absorbed with descriptions of *kiddush ha-shem*, death, martyrdom by fire, *akeida* and other methods of self-sacrifice. Hayim Vital considered death part of ecstatic *dveikut* in the morning prayer, during the recitation of the *shema* and in *nefilat apayim*. Similar views of simulated death as enabling unity with the Shekhina can be found in the writings of Menahem Azaria of Pano, who referred to Moshe Yona, the ARI's disciple.⁵³ The Tsfat Kabbalists viewed simulated death as a climax of mystical experience, which can be reached while weeping, sleeping or praying, viewing mystical life as a constant preparation for death.⁵⁴ Following the Zohar, the RAMAK (Kordovero) also viewed *nefilat apayim* as a symbolic death by martyrdom, which acts as an atonement for sins, as a way to deceive the Angel of Death, and also as a means to renovate a person's spiritual powers so he can best influence the superior world.⁵⁵

The BESHT adopted this view, but added an imaginative aspect to the idea of spiritual *kiddush ha-shem*. He recommended that during prayer one should see in his imagination images of death, sacrifice and tortures, and before the prayer one should say that he wishes to torture himself and to sacrifice himself

51 *Zohar* part 3 p. 121a. See Tishbi, *Zohar*, vol 2 p, 276, no. 325.

52 On self annihilation in Hassidism see Elijah, *The Teaching of God*.

53 Wolfson, "Weeping and Death."

54 Wolfson used the expression "being toward-death," *ibid.*, p. 231.

55 Zak, *Cordovero*, pp. 234-237.

to God.⁵⁶ The BESHT demanded that one “should take himself away from all terrestrial business as if he died.”⁵⁷ He wrote: “Therefore I want to torture myself in order to sacrifice myself to Him.”⁵⁸ Later, Hassidism developed the idea of *avoda be-bitul* (worshipping God through self-annihilation) and self-death.⁵⁹ The interiorization and spiritualization of the concept of *kiddush ha-shem*⁶⁰ was continued in the HABAD movement, mixing it with the ideas of *messirat nefesh* (self-sacrifice) and *bitul* (self-annihilation). *Kiddush ha-shem* was understood here not as real death, but as a simulation of death while praying.⁶¹ *Avoda be-bitul* in Hassidism is religious elevation through denial of the real existence of the self and the world, and in its highest degree it leads to *messirat nefesh*, namely, to an ecstatic feeling of readiness to die. RASHAZ (Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, 1745-1815), the founder of the HABAD movement, wrote in his *Tania*, the movement’s central book, that the human soul is attracted to death by its very nature: “So the human soul (...) wishes and desires by its nature to part and to go out of the body and to unite with its root and fountain (...) although it becomes nothing and none and its existence is completely annihilated.”⁶² The idea of *messirat nefesh* was repeated and developed in the Hassidic writings of Rabbi Aharon of Starossela⁶³ and Rabbi Elimelech of Lizansk.⁶⁴

Desire for death as the soul’s homeland is considered in Hassidism the natural form of high spiritual life. Rabbi Nahman of Braslav adopted this idea of “death by sacrifice” and saw death as a redemption and *tikkun* for oneself and for others.⁶⁵

56 Elijor, “Rabbi Yosef Caro,” pp. 683, 699-700.

57 BESHT, *The History of Yaakov Yosef*, p. 208d

58 BESHT, *The RIVASH Testament*, p. 10.

59 Schatz, *Hassidism as Mysticism*, pp. 21-40; Weiss, “The Passive Way.”

60 The term “spiritualization of *kidush ha-shem*” was coined by Yaacov Katz in his *Between 1096 to 1648*, p. 324.

61 Loewenthal, “Self-Sacrifice of the Zadik,” pp. 465-475; Elijor, “Rabbi Yosef Caro,” p. 274; Pedaia, “The Mystical Experience.”

62 RASHAZ, *Tania* ch. 19, p. 24. See also RASHAZ, *Tora Or*, p. 107a; idem, *Likutei Tora*, p. 34b. See also Elijor, *Unity of Contrasts*, pp. 171-203; idem, *The Teaching of God*, pp. 276-280, 306.

63 Elijor, *The Teaching of God*, pp. 276-280.

64 Fishbane, “The Imagination of Death,” pp. 468-473.

65 Weiss, *The Braslav Hassidism*, pp. 176-177.

His immigration to Eretz-Yisrael was for him a way to complete self-annihilation, a sort of spiritual *kiddush ha-shem*.⁶⁶ An additional relevant concept in Hassidism is the *hiner bet*, a situation of fainting, or clinical death, in which the soul goes up to heaven, and returns to this world to describe what it has seen above.⁶⁷

In addition to the importance of joy, playing, dance and everyday practice, Hassidism cultivated the idea of self-annihilation, the mystic's inner readiness to die, and the imaginary temporary experience of death.

Mystical Self-Annihilation in Jewish-Russian Culture

As mentioned above, the interest of modern Hebrew literature in mysticism began during the last decade of the nineteenth century, when in both Germany and Russia — the two main sources of influence on Hebrew writers at that time — writers and intellectuals who were disappointed with Liberal (in Germany) and Positivist (in Russia) ideas began to be interested in mystical “Eastern” teachings.⁶⁸ The attraction to Eastern mysticism included attraction to death. Thus Schopenhauer, who was attracted to Buddhism, viewed the rejection of the will to live as a way to redemption. Both Schopenhauer and Nietzsche — the most influential European philosophers in the early 20th century — wrote about suicide as a noble action, which should be highly appreciated.⁶⁹ These ideas became popular in Russia together with the rise of mysticism.⁷⁰

The attraction of Jewish Russian writers and intellectuals to mystical self-annihilation and death grew also from the literary influence of Symbolism and Neo-Romanticism, which were flourishing in Germany and other European countries, including Russia, at the turn of the 20th century. Beautiful

66 Mark, *Mysticism and Madness*, pp. 281-287.

67 Marc, *ibid*, pp. 281-287. On fainting as part of mystical experience see Pedaia, “The Mystical Experience,” pp. 86-87.

68 Mendes Flohr, “Orientalism”.

69 Schopenhauer, “On Suicide”; Nietzsche, “On Free Death.”

70 Rosenthal, *Nietzsche in Russia*.

descriptions of attractive suicidal situations can be found in the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche, Thomas Mann and Reiner Maria Rilke in Germany; Stanislaw Przysbyszewsky in Poland; Gabrielle d'Anunzio in Italy; and Knut Hamsun in Norway. Jewish writers in Germany, such as Hugo von Hoffmansthal, Richard Beer-Hoffman and Jakob Wassermann, contributed to this fashion.

In Russia the interest in Eastern mysticism had a “homecoming” aspect, for the “East” was a slogan and a flag for Russian opponents to Western orientation during the 19th century. The crisis of Western rationalistic and scientific orientations in Russia drew Russian intellectuals, writers and artists toward Eastern mystical teachings, which seemed to them close to the roots of Russian culture in Eastern Christianity. Thus the sacredness of suffering is a central motif in the writings of Dostoevsky, who had a great influence on Russian writers and religious thinkers at the turn of the 20th century. Together with the enthusiastic reception of Schopenhauer in Russia (an enthusiasm shared by Lev Tolstoy, Ivan Turgeniev, and Afanassi Fet), there was a rising Russian interest in Buddhist mysticism, especially in its ascetic and Platonic-Idealistic aspects, at the end of the 19th century. This interest was shared by the thinkers Nikolay Strakhov, Nikolay Grott, Piotr Lavrov, Fiodor Gusev, Nikolay Khlebnikov, Evgeny Trubetskoi, Vladimir Soloviev, Nikolay Berdiaev and Vladimir Ern. It was also expressed in the writings of the prose writers Fiodor Sologub and Dmitry Merezhkovsky. Buddhist and Moslem symbols were used by the symbolist poet Innokenti Aniensky in his *Book of Reflections*. The symbolist poets Andrey Biely, Konstantin Bal'mont and Alexander Blok were influenced by Indian Vedas and by East Asian Taoism.

At that time, the majority of Russian mystics were intellectuals and writers who dissented from the Orthodox Church and were under both Western and Eastern European cultural influence. The Russian focus was on asceticism, including pilgrimage and wandering, avoidance of marriage, extreme altruism, self-sacrifice and self-annihilation.⁷¹

This mood influenced Jewish-Russian intellectuals: the poet and philosopher Nikolay Minsky (Vilenkin) in his books *In the Light of Conscience* (1890) and *The Religion of the Future* (1905) created a mystical teaching which combined elements from the Kabbalah with elements from the teachings of

71 Kravchenko, *Mysticism in Russian Philosophy*, pp. 225-229.

Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. Semion Gruzenberg in his book *The Teaching of Schopenhauer on Law and Government* (1909) examined the moral and political conclusions of Schopenhauer's philosophy. Ascetic concepts were well known to Jewish writers of Yiddish and Hebrew texts who lived in Czarist Russia (which then included Poland), and were the catalysts of the Jewish search for similar motifs in Judaism and the wish to revive them in modern Jewish writing.

The ascetic orientation of mysticism was in complete contrast to the ideal of "Life," the central idea of the Movement of Jewish Revival in Hebrew literature during the 19th and early 20th century.⁷² Shaul Chernikhovsky's cry, *Or Yah li or Yah (...) Khayim!, hoi, khaim!* (Give me God's light, God's light ... Life! O Life), in his scandalous poem "Facing Apollo's Statue" (1899), represented the spirit of Hebrew Revival Literature and its central criterion of value. It implied the presupposition that traditional Jewish life has prevented the Jew from living his "life" in the modern European, especially Romantic, sense, and therefore it is necessary to revive the vital, "healthy" elements of Judaism. From this point of departure, young Berdychevsky in 1890 criticized the Jewish interest in Kabbalah and Hassidism:

Judaism is a teaching of life (...) it will never strive to kill one's desires and emotions, [in Judaism] whoever tortures himself is considered as a sinner, while Kabbalah is a dead teaching, a teaching of asceticism, a teaching which intends to kill the human spirit, to oppress and weaken it, to cut the wings of feelings.⁷³

Berdychevsky viewed the *masskalic* ideal of "Life" as a natural continuation of the ancient Jewish tradition, which, in contrast to Christianity and other religions, and also in contrast to mysticism as he understood it, emphasized the value of life.

At the same time, Hebrew writers (including Berdychevsky himself) yearned to be part of their contemporary European literature. Their models were mainly Russian and German literature, which at that time was oriented

72 Miron, *Come, Night*, pp. 197-201.

73 Berdychevsky, *Complete Works*, vol. 2, p. 200.

to Symbolism, a literary movement which included mystical suicidal motifs and was the opposite of any belief in revival. In this context, which was absorbed with neo-mystical moods, the attraction to death was described as a mystical aesthetic experience. Contemporary European literature strengthened the attraction of Hebrew writers to such motifs in Jewish mysticism. In this period, at the turn of the 20th century, Hebrew literature found itself in an ambivalent stance toward life: on the one hand, Hebrew writers wished to express the regenerating powers of the Jewish soul, but on the other hand, they were impressed by and attracted to death as part of their attraction to contemporary Western European and Russian literatures. This situation resulted in both an emphasis on Jewish mystical-suicidal motifs and the opposite reaction.

Death in Neo-Hassidic Prose

Both Peretz in his collection of neo-Hassidic stories *Hassidism* (1900) and Berdychevsky in his *The Book of Hassidim* (1900) (see ch.2) described Hassidic ecstasy as a mystical experience of enormous emotional vitality and as a manifestation of “Life” in its modern sense. This was one of the reasons for Berdychevsky’s excited review of Peretz’s *Hassidism*. Berdychevsky wrote:

Peretz’s *Hassidism* is the Song of Songs in our new literature (...) the [Hassidic] *nigun* (song/ melody) is a living creature (...) it is living in front of us with its real power (...) it is still fresh and full of vigor, it appears in front of us as if it is becoming poorer and weaker, but will then revive and stand up in front of us (...) and we shall live with it.⁷⁴

Both writers also described the ascetic and suicidal aspect of Hassidism, although their attitudes to it were different: Peretz satirically criticized it, in line with his Socialist sympathies, while Berdychevsky found in Hassidism an affinity to the teaching of Schopenhauer. Peretz, in his second Hassidic

74 Berdychevsky, “Divrei Zemer.”

story, “The Kabbalists” (1891),⁷⁵ expressed an ambivalent stance toward Hassidism in general and toward the Hassidic idea of self-annihilation in particular. This ambivalent stance is characteristic of Peretz’s neo-Hassidic stories, which were mistakenly viewed — together with Buber’s neo-Hassidic texts — as an idealizing transmission of the Hassidic spirit.⁷⁶ In “The Kabbalists” the writer criticizes the Hassidic Rabbi, who speaks highly about the spiritually purifying power of the fast, but eats his own food with great appetite. His disciple treats his Rabbi’s teaching with enormous seriousness, fasts and tortures himself unto death. While doing so he has an experience of disembodiment, including hearing heavenly melodies and seeing the heavenly light. When the narrator describes the student’s experience, it is clear that the student has a powerful, authentic mystical experience, including a spiritual delight in beauty and poetic charm, although it is not clear whether this is not a delusion caused by the prolonged fast. Peretz described the disciple’s ecstasy with neo-Romantic idealization, as an experience of poetic inspiration, accompanied by violin music and the sight of nature’s beauty. Using the disciple’s point of view, Peretz made the reader sympathize with the Hassidic *nigun*, but not with the ascetic fast unto death. The satire on the pious verbosity of the Rabbi ironically appears at the end of the story, when the Rabbi comments on his disciple’s death: “Had he overcome four more fasts, he could have received a Death with a Kiss.” Peretz did not share the Hassidic admiration of such a death. From his point of view the disciple lost his life because of his naivety and because of the Rabbi’s hypocrisy. The disciple’s death is a result of his childish naivety, to which Peretz did attribute sacredness.

In Peretz’s story “*Karet*” (excommunication), included in the collection *Hassidism*,⁷⁷ a Hassid tells about the death of a young *parush* (a Hassid who leads an ascetic life), who had never spoken out, but before passing away opened his eyes, looked at the window as if watching heavenly visions, and gave a long talk. The narrator describes the unforgettable and ineffable

75 Peretz’s first Hassidic story was “The Kadish,” it was published in 1889 but was not included in *Hassidism*. “The Kabbalists” was first published in 1891 in Hebrew, then in 1894 in Yiddish. This story opens Peretz’s Yiddish collection of stories *Hassidish* (1901).

76 Jacobson, *Modern Midrash*, p. 51.

77 Peretz, *Complete Works in Hebrew*, vol 2, pp. 83-86.

impression which this moment made on him: “We practically saw that his ears were opened to the spirit (...) We became very frightened. I, for instance, heard that my friends’ teeth were knocking each other ... and my heart was beating, beating.” The *parush*’s talk is a rather long preaching in a pseudo-Hassidic style, in which Peretz expressed his philosophical views about the situation of humanity and about chosen people, by means of Jewish mystical images and symbols (*tsadik*, garden, trees, the tree of evil and the tree of goodness). After the *parush* finished his talk he “fell back with foam on his lips” (reminiscent of Dostoevsky’s *Idiot*) and died. This is a description of mystical death, but this death does not disconnect the hero from life. On the contrary, death is his opportunity to influence life. Peretz did not give up here the secular ideal of “Life,” he only dressed it in Hassidic clothes.

Peretz’s story “Three Presents” (Hebrew 1899, Yiddish 1904) tells about three deaths through *kiddush ha-shem*, and here again we meet his dual attitude: his empathy with the naïve Jew who is ready to sacrifice himself and to die heroically, on the one hand, and his criticism of the itching palms of Hassidic Rabbis, on the other hand.

Berdychevsky’s *The Book of Hassidim* showed a dramatic positive turn toward Hassidism and mysticism. (see ch. 2). In some of these texts he brought to an extreme the Hassidic idea of *bitul*, interpreting it according to Schopenhauer’s philosophical rejection of reality and his evaluation of self-annihilation. In “The Hassidic Soul,” the introductory essay to *The Book of Hassidim*, Berdychevsky wrote that in his youth he had revolted against his parents’ and teachers’ condemnations of “the impure material.” He could not understand them: “But why do they threaten people? I asked my soul then; why should one person block the other’s door to life? (...) Then I considered the world to be a place of merrymaking, intended just for pleasures: live and enjoy, enjoy and live.”⁷⁸ Later, however, he understood that basing life on its material aspects is “a big lie and a *delusion*” (underlined in the original), that spirit has great powers which stir up humanity and make history move, and that Jewish mysticism is such a power. Berdychevsky defined Jewish mysticism

78 Berdychevsky, *The Book of Hassidim*, p. 7.

as a teaching in which spiritual purity is the center of life, an effort to turn terrestrial life into life after death:

We Jews as well (...) know such spiritual motivations. We also were worthy of heavenly light and heavenly 'Kabbala which stands at God's threshold (...) We also have seen in this world a sort of *olam ha-ba* (the world to come), the world's Shekhina. And the "Heavenly Shekhina" most clearly appears in the world of Hassidism, a world of purity and the inwardness of life, the only spiritual world which we have had, for now, in our long history.⁷⁹

In *The Book of Hassidim* Berdychevsky, even more than Peretz, stresses the centrality of self-annihilation and self-sacrifice in Hassidism (Peretz stressed joy, music and everyday practice no less), but his attitude toward these phenomena was different from Peretz's: he described death as a moment of wonderful climax in the process of mystical unity, which brings the *tsadik* to his final, real religious goal.

"Two Worlds," the opening story of Berdychevsky's *The Book of Hassidim*, describes the moment of death of Rabbi Eliezer, the BESHT's father, as a sanctification and a kiss-like contact between the terrestrial and the heavenly worlds.⁸⁰ "Immortality," the seventh text in the book, describes the BESHT's death as a rite of arrival at the heavenly world, where he sees everything from the primordial era on, and understands all the secrets of God. This is a time of total purification. The BESHT accepts death peacefully, only with a light astonishment. Later the BESHT can see primordial history as well as the world of eternal life and all the heavenly beings who come to meet him, "and on the face of every one of them lies God's joy, sacred immortality." In this hour of death, "The world unites — a kiss of Gods [sic!] — immortality..."⁸¹ About the reception of the BESHT in the heavenly world the narrator tells the reader: "And you, human being, if you will win the right, when you pass away from this inferior world and come to the superior paradise — come and rise, when the Shabbat is over, to the great palace which is opened to the River Di-Nur

79 Ibid., p. 10-11.

80 Ibid., pp. 26-27.

81 Ibid., pp. 42-43.

(The River of Fire); there you will find the light of “Israel” [the BESHT] sitting on a ivory chair at the table of God.”⁸² The narrator says here that death is a chance for the reader to see the heavenly world and to meet the BESHT.

Berdychevsky described the death of the *tsadik* as a wonderful, purifying, bewitching, revitalizing experience. Unlike Peretz, he attributed the revitalization of the soul not to contact with nature or to aesthetic sensitivity, but to the moment of death. For example, in the story “Resurrection,” a rich sinner obsessed by feelings of guilt urgently goes to the BESHT. His way in the snow is described here as a process of purification, which gradually dominates him unto his death. Paradoxically the hero feels his dying as resurrection, widening, warming up and blossoming “What he feels now in himself and in his soul is something like life of death (...) redemption — eternal sleep — resurrection.”⁸³

The Hassidic idea of self-annihilation is most clearly formulated in the story *Bitul Ha-Yesh* (The Annihilation of Being), which is the last story in *The Book of Hassidim*. Its ecstatic style bears witness to the writer’s identification with the ideas he attributed to Hassidism. Here he views the inner experience of self-annihilation not only as the supreme degree of Jewish *avodat ha-shem* (religious service of God) in general, but also as a spiritual activity whose importance is tantamount to all other Hassidic methods of *avodat ha-shem*: *hitpashtut ha-gashmiut* (disembodiment), *avoda she-balev* (inner service of God), *hitlahavut* (excitement) and *hityakhadut* (unity). Speaking in behalf of Hassidism, the narrator rejects the importance of any other religious duty:

Not *Torah* and *mitzvot* in the literal sense of the word, not sacredness and purity in real deeds, not the essence and the annihilation of corporeality, not beneficial thoughts and good deeds and what have you, even not service and inner service — not understanding, not elevation and not unity, only one thing is demanded from you, only one: annihilate yourself! *Annihilate the being in yourself!* (...) *get out of yourself! Stop being.* (underlined in the original).⁸⁴

82 Ibid., p. 45.

83 Ibid., p. 33.

84 Ibid., p. 88.

Here Berdychevsky goes far in his interpretation of the Hassidic *bitul hayesh* as a complete annihilation of life and even a negation of God. In fact, HABAD's teaching rejects — from God's point of view — the existence of terrestrial reality and of everything which is not God, but it by no means negates the existence of God.⁸⁵ Berdychevsky attributed to Hassidism even a negation of Nothing itself. He presented this idea as the revelation of a heavenly voice, and he polemizes with whoever viewed mysticism otherwise:

You think of the Chariots and the Book of Creation, of the greatness of *Makom* (God; literally: place) and the place of the world, while [in fact] there is no Place and no world, no Being above Being, no account and no will, no Nothing ... the thought cannot capture, there is no thought and being at all.⁸⁶

Berdychevsky referred here to the expression *leit makhshava tfisa* (the thought cannot capture Him) from the *Tania*,⁸⁷ but he developed it further, in a more daring direction, negating not only the possibility of understanding God by human thought, but also the mere existence of any being. This idea, which cannot be attributed to Hassidic thought, is later developed by Berdychevsky in a Schopenhauerian vein, stressing the illusory character of human conceptual thought and the idea that human will in general, and especially the human will for life, are an obstacle in the way to truth. Following Schopenhauer, Berdychevsky identified the annihilation of all being with the rejection of the will to live: "And you, human beings, as long as your soul is living and you wish to catch some meaning of things, reject the idols in yourselves, eliminate the will to live and do not leave any remnant of it, cancel the being!" (underlined in the original).⁸⁸

Berdychevsky rejected the view that God was the origin of goodness, and whatever He created carried goodness in it. He argued: "All evil [derives] only from the H.V.Y.A. [God] Himself, and only from Him in His essence."⁸⁹ Whatever exists is evil by nature, hence the ideal situation is complete annihilation.

85 Elior, *Unity of Contrasts*, pp. 51-62.

86 Berdychevsky, *The Book of Hassidim*, p. 89.

87 RASHAZ, *Tania*, ch. 5

88 Berdychevsky, *The Book of Hassidim*, p. 90.

89 Ibid.

Berdychevsky finished *The Book of Hassidim* with a vision of the End of Days, when the whole of existence will be erased and return into Nothing.

In only one of *The Book of Hassidim*'s stories, "A Candle for Light," is there a hint about the danger of the Hassidic inclination to self-annihilation. In it the BESHT studied together with the *tsadik* who brought sacred writings to him, but the devil exchanged the candle, which enabled them to learn and helped them to get very near full mystical union, by aid of another candle, which burns and kills the *tsadik*, the house and the whole city.

How can we explain away the contradiction between Berdychevsky's attraction to death and his being part of the literary movement of Jewish revival? The answer can be found not only in his changing moods and views, but also in the general radical change of world view, due to the crisis of belief in Western Enlightenment. It can also be found in the influence of Schopenhauer's pessimistic philosophy, which Berdychevsky followed during the period of his studies in Berlin and Bern during the 1890s.⁹⁰ *The Book of Hassidim* was a product of this period of time in his life. It is possible that his admiration for Dostoevsky also led him to a high evaluation of asceticism, but in contrast to Dostoevsky's work, *The Book of Hassidim* does not base redemption on human love but on the Schopenhauerian directive of annihilation of the self as part of the annihilation of the world.

The poetic style of *The Book of Hassidim* might give the impression that the text is a description of the writer's personal experiences. However, it is not by chance that these stories are written in the third person. Berdychevsky described here powerful spiritual events to which he reacted with astonishment, but they were not necessarily his own experiences. Like Peretz, he also watched Hassidism's ecstasy and attraction to self-annihilation from an ambivalent point of view, and his reactions included admiration, astonishment and fear.

Like Berdychevsky, Mordechai Zeev Feierberg knew Hassidism from within, from his home, from his close neighborhood and from his studies in the *kloiz* (a small Hassidic Beit Midrash) of the Chernobyl Hassidim. His stories take place against the background of Hassidic life in the *shtetl* and are written in a lyrical style, from a more personal and emotional point of view, than the

90 Lachover, "Berdychevsky"; idem, *History of Literature* vol. 3 part 1, pp. 84-86; idem, Berdychevsky 2; Holzman, *Towards the Tear*, pp. 56-57.

stories in Berdychevsky's *The Book of Hassidim*. The autobiographical heroes of his stories, "Where?" (1897) and "The Shdaows" (1899),⁹¹ are *beit ha-midrash* students who reach ecstatic mystical experiences together with attraction to death. In both cases the activity which precedes the mystical experience is neither prayer nor any other religious ritual, nor singing or dancing, but study of the Talmud. Feierberg here goes in the opposite direction from *hasskala* literature and the *hasskala* movement, and explores a concept Bialik also dealt with in his long poem *Ha-matmid* (The Diligent Student in the Yeshiva, 1898): in contrast to the idea that Talmud study was killing Jewish emotional life, Feierberg and Bialik described Talmud study as an ecstatic spiritual experience, loaded with powerful emotions, similar to a mystical experience. In "The Shadows" a whole world of fantasy, the world of the shadows, comes to life through the sad tunes used when learning *Gemara*. In spite of the sadness, the time spent in studying comprises moments of great happiness and of a rich emotional, irrational activity: "And I do not understand my own soul; I do not even understand the ends of the thousands of dominions which dominate me then and are making peace in these happy moments."⁹² Feierberg was not only against the ideas of *hasskala*, but also against the Hassidic way, which undermined the importance of the Talmud study. For him the Talmud was a fountain of sacredness and spiritual powers.

In Feierberg's long story "Where?" Nahman, the young son of the Rabbi, experiences a prolonged inner struggle while trying to overcome his attraction to "Life" — to the beauty of nature and amusements of childhood — and to devote himself to study. Sometimes he succeeds in devoting himself to study, and then he feels ready to give up life and joyfully die by *kiddush ha-shem*:

And as though a voice calling inside him: "Tears! Let there be tears! Let there be many pains and anger! Go on! Burn, make the fire bigger! Show me the fires and the rivers of blood as well! I want to be happy like all those who were slaughtered! I want, I too want to bravely slaughter my brothers and sisters, to

91 Feierberg, *Complete Works*, pp. 63-125, 131-140.

92 *Ibid.*, p. 132.

call in a mocking smile: “Hear Israel, our God is one!” and to fall on the sword and die as a sacred martyr.⁹³

Nahman the teenager revolts against his father the Hassid, who says that the secret weapon and life of the Jewish people in the Diaspora is the study of the Torah by *itra'uta dileila* (Aramaic: disembodiment). He feels that this weapon has long been rusty, and a new weapon should be looked for. The crisis of religious belief lays bare declining Judaism, close to its final death. “The Jewish people is ill, it has been hovering and sighing for two thousand years, and its bitter sighs — this is its literature throughout the ages.”⁹⁴ Out of identification with the death of his people, Nahman extinguishes *the ner tamid* (the Eternal Candle) in the synagogue on the eve of *Yom Kippur* (the Day of Atonement). For him, this deed was a symbolic suicide; for the people of the *shtetl* it was a demonstration of Nahman’s insanity.

Nahman does not carry out his deed while in a mystical trance, but as part of his extreme reaction to the terrible chasm between Jewish spiritual richness and its petty and lazy everyday life, which has lost its spiritual dimension. The terrible, suicidal deed is a revolutionary result of a strong inner spiritual “fire.” Life which is not part of this fire is — from both the hero’s and the writer’s point of view — a life of spiritual death. To the writer, Nahman’s suicidal act is one of the last manifestations of the same sacredness which was active in Jewish life in general and in Jewish martyrdom in particular. Before his death, Nahman opens his eyes to see earthly life, then calls his community to join the Zionist movement. Feierberg compared Nahman’s awakening to “the last flame which arose from the bottom of his heart and burst out” before death. He compared his hero’s readiness to sacrifice himself for the sake of sacredness to the Jewish martyrs’ readiness to die, erasing the contrast between Jews who have been keeping religious laws and those who have been revolting against it. Nahman’s revolt against the impoverished traditional Jewish world reflects the same readiness for asceticism and martyr’s death which was characteristic of his forefathers. Like them, he is also fighting for the existence of Judaism.

93 Ibid.

94 Ibid., p. 118.

“The Shadows,” Feierberg’s last story, was written in the first person singular and in a tone of great inner strife. At its center is young Hofni’s excited confession of his love for the world of shadows and his hate for the pleasures of life. The story opens thus:

And in the whole big and wide world with its many nice amusements, in the whole life which is full of spectacles and pleasures, nothing charmed me except the shadows. Many are the people who love day and light, and I love night and shadows. Dark night and black shadows — are there more pleasant sights than these sights?⁹⁵

This is not about attraction to visual shadows. The “light” is a metaphor of terrestrial pleasures, which for Hofni are “an open hell” full of “base desire,” which influence him against his will and force him to “enjoy the cursed, vain, tasteless world.” Hofni confesses that “my heart is imprisoned against my will to the world and its vanities.” This is why he does not live among shadow-lovers but only turns to the shadows with his thoughts. He sees the *beit ha-midrash* as full of shadows, a world of death, a graveyard: “The soft study columns which are dispersed all through the place look like tombstones over graves.”⁹⁶ Hofni merges with the world of shadows at night, when he is alone in the *beit ha-midrash* studying the Talmud and the candle is filling the space with shadows, whispering indecipherable secrets. Hofni’s meeting with the shadows is described as swallowing them:

And I play games with the shadows, I swallow them into my inner soul (...) I breath them in, enjoy their black image and I want them to become darker, become darker and expand and fill the whole world with sweet terror and pleasant fear — like [they do to] me.⁹⁷

Here Feierberg combines Jewish sacredness with death: his hero imagines the martyrs whose dead bodies float in rivers of blood “and in the blood, among the broken and oppressed bodies, are hovering souls — how sacred and how sublime!”

95 Ibid., p. 131.

96 Ibid.

97 Ibid., p. 132.

Hofni describes this world of death with words from Kabbalistic terminology, with names of the heavenly *sefirot*: “Here I see the light and the goodness before me and the *Netsakh* (Eternity) and *Hod* (Glory)” (underlined in the original).⁹⁸ When he thinks about the possibility of reviving the Jewish spirit which is hidden in the holy books, he formulates his thought in suicidal terms: “Happy is the man who will hold and break these dry pages to the rock, to uncover them from the thick dust, so they can be seen with all their brilliance and purity.”⁹⁹

In his love for the shadows, Hofni recognizes the inheritance of Judaism. He is reminded of his father’s stories of moments of elevation while studying the Talmud: “He used to say that he had then the feeling that a spirit from above was placed within him and a sacred fire descended to his heart from heaven, filling his whole innards with warm love for the sad melody, for night and shadows.”¹⁰⁰ Feierberg not only attributed sacredness to voluntary death within Hassidism; he saw it as the core of Judaism in general. Moreover, for him this was the common denominator between traditional Judaism and the generation which revolted against it. He did not describe passive devotion to physical annihilation, but an active, heroic martyrdom, intended to guard the sacredness within modern life. Without a readiness for such heroism, Feierberg anticipated a Jewish spiritual death out of degeneration.

Feierberg’s positive attitude toward the idea of martyrdom was probably influenced by Russian literature, especially by Dostoevsky, whom he admired, and perhaps also by Fiodor Sologub, a Russian poet and prose writer who in 1896 published a collection of stories titled *Light and Shadows*.¹⁰¹ In January 5, 1898, Feierberg apologetically wrote to Ahad Ha-Am, the authoritative editor of *Ha-shilo’ach*, who was against this modernist influence on Hebrew literature, “I confess (...) that I have been used to Symbolism.”¹⁰² His essays and other letters to Ahad Ha-am witness that Russian literature was for him a model with which Hebrew literature should try to compete. Nahman’s dramatic extinction of the candle in the story “Where?” reminds one of the burning money and the

98 Ibid., p. 134.

99 Ibid., p. 135.

100 Ibid.

101 Bar-Yosef, “Feieberg and Sologub.”

102 Ibid., p. 182.

destruction of the Chinese flower pot in Dostoevsky's novel *The Idiot* (1868). For Dostoevsky these scenes of provocative destruction in public paradoxically bear witness to the Christian greatness of soul which is hidden at the heart of impurity and sickness. Like Dostoevsky, Feierberg viewed in the readiness for sacrifice a hidden national characteristic whose remnants are active in the chosen few who have a prophetic vision, without which the nation might lose its spirit and its God.

Shmuel Yosef Agnon was the inheritor of the neo-Hassidic prose fiction which Peretz, Berdychevsky and Feierberg had created. Agnon's family was not Hassidic — his grandfather was a strong *misnaged* — but his father, who was erudite in many aspects of Jewish life, used to pray in the *kloiz* of the Chortkov's Hassidim, which was the biggest in the town. From time to time he also went to visit Hassidic Rabbis, and on these trips he took his son with him. Agnon dedicated his story "*Ha-Nidakh*" (The Outcast) to his late father.

Mystical deaths are at the centers of Agnon's Hassidic stories — "*Toitentanz*" ("The Death Dance," Yiddish, written in 1907, published in 1911), "*Aliyat Neshama*" ("The Ascension of a Soul," 1909), "Miriam's Well" (1909), "The Outcast" (1919) and "The Writer's Legend" (German 1917, Hebrew 1919). In all these stories, Agnon idealized the mystical experience, which he attributed to Hassidism, and criticized the *misnagdim*.¹⁰³ Agnon went much further than Peretz, Berdychevsky and Feierberg in the idealization of mystical death. He described mystical death as an erotic and aesthetic experience, close to the Romantic *Liebestod* (death through love).

In both "The Ascension of a Soul" and "The Outcast" there is a story of a son/grandson of a *misnagdish* Rabbi, who is attracted to Hassidism in spite of his father's/grandfather's hatred for it, and who follows a Hassidic *Tsadik* who returns to the town after spending time away following his persecution by the *misnagdish* Rabbi.¹⁰⁴ The son/grandson stops his Talmud study and devotes himself to the study of The Song of Songs with Kabbalistic interpretation. He achieves

103 On *Liebestod* in Agnon's stories see Shaked, *Agnon*, pp. 37-39. Shaked writes about it as a "sentimental motif"

104 Agnon used here historical facts: The Hassidic family of the ADMOR Eiger were descendents of the *misnagdi* Rabbi Akiva Eiger. I would like to thank Rachel Elior for this piece of information.

full *dveikut* (mystical unity), but his sick heart fails and he dies while reading The Song of Songs. In “The Outcast” a subplot is added in which the grandson’s mother dies and he is attracted to Hassidism out of his nostalgia for her. As in Peretz’s “The Kabalists,” death here has a medical cause, which strengthens the realistic dimension of the story, but here a psychological Freudian cause was added by Agnon: the hero’s yearning for God is a cause of his pathological depression. This pathology also has an erotic aspect: the hero achieves a complete union with God when he reads the sentence “The King brought me to his chambers” (The Song of Songs 1:4), the same sentence which was said by Rabbi Akiva in the Talmudic story about the four who entered the *pardes*.

Like Peretz and Berdychovsky, Agnon treated mystical ecstasy with ambivalence. He viewed it, on the one hand, as a dangerous attraction to self-annihilation, and on the other as a desire that heated the weakened inner energies. The hero of “Elevation of the Soul,” whose heart is sick, yearns for a strong religious emotion which will bring back to his heart the strength to beat: “Master of all worlds, let my heart beat. This heart which you have given to me — does it beat? In fact it is hiding from your great and awful name, while it should have roared from great love to you, *Ha-shem* (God).”¹⁰⁵ He is ready to meet God even in hell: “Let my bones burn in hell, if one of their crumbs will reach you.”¹⁰⁶ Here Agnon was close to Berdychovsky in his understanding of mystical experiences as disconnected from the distinction between Good and Evil.

The motif of *Liebestod* is very clear in “*Toitentanz*,” “Miriam’s Well,” and “The Legend of the Writer.” All three stories discuss the death of Raphael the writer, which takes place while the hero is united with Miriam, his beloved dead wife. She appears to him in a wedding dress and dances with him and with the Torah book he has written. When he removes the veil from her face, God removes His *talit* of light, and the divine light together with Miriam’s bridal dress wrap Raphael, who falls down dead on his book.¹⁰⁷ Agnon’s Neo-Romantic poetics, implying the equation mysticism = love unto death = art, dominate these stories.¹⁰⁸ Devotion unto death is for Agnon the ultimate

105 Agnon, *These and Those*, p. 55.

106 Agnon, “The Ascention of a Soul,” p. 445.

107 Agnon, *These and Those*, pp. 144-145.

108 Shaked, *Agnon*, p. 20.

expression of all these three. The opening of “*Toitentanz*” explicitly states the autobiographical character of this story, for indeed here Agnon, like Peretz in his story “*Karet*,” discussed himself and his method as an artist through the use of Hassidic terms.

Self-Annihilation and Death in Pre-State Hebrew Poetry

Are death and self-annihilation possible themes in Zionist poetry? Zionism adopted and sanctified the belief in national renaissance as well as in Vitalistic ideas, which attributed values beyond Good and Evil to physical and sensual vitality. Zionist ideology accepted suffering, sacrifice and even death as a stage or even a condition of national revival, not as a sacred goal for itself. However, tension between belief in Zionism and attraction to self-annihilation can be found in the poetry of Bialik, Avraham Ben-Yitzhak and Nathan Alterman.

What was the source of this attraction? In contrast to Avraham Shlonsky and Uri Zvi Greenberg, who grew up in Hassidic families (but did not express attraction to death and self-annihilation in their poetry), none of these three poets was raised in a Hassidic family. Although Alterman’s grandfather on his father’s side was a HABAD Hassid, and his grandfather on his mother’s side, Rabbi Nathan Schneiur Leibovich (the poet’s namesake), was a HABAD Rabbi, the poet grew up in a completely secular home. In school he learned *TANACH*, *Mishna* and *Talmud*, but nothing about Jewish mysticism.¹⁰⁹ This is why a Hassidic background cannot serve as an explanation for this phenomenon. It is more reasonable to presume that the source of his attraction to death is not Jewish mysticism but the contemporary early modern cultural climate, especially the ideas and moods of European Decadence and Symbolism. Following these trends, Jewish poets found similar motifs in Jewish tradition and combined these elements together.

The same is true of Bialik. In his early poems there are no mystical elements at all; on the contrary, in his youth he wrote satirical poems, mocking

¹⁰⁹ Dorman, *Alterman*, pp. 16, 31; Zimereman, “Alterman and HABAD”; Zimerman, *Alterman*, pp. 18-22.

the Hassidic *tsadik*.¹¹⁰ He also criticized the “weeping” mood of *Hibat-Tsion* poetry, namely the mourning over national suffering characteristic of Hebrew poetry during the 1880s and early 1890s. Young Bialik’s poems, even if they dealt with difficult national and personal situations, generally contained hope and encouragement. While he also confessed his tendency toward depression, which he viewed as a result of the suffering of his childhood or as an inheritance of his mother’s bitterness,¹¹¹ this mood is not presented as a way to sacredness. Bialik presented the attraction to death as a dangerous seduction, not as a redemptive mystical experience, in his poems “On My Return” (1896?), “A Cemetery” (1901), the long poem “The Scroll of Fire” (1905), and “In Front of the Bookcase” (1910).

Bialik’s turn to mysticism took place as his interest in Symbolism, which at that time was dominant in Russian poetry, grew.¹¹² As mentioned above, Russian Symbolist poetry idealized self-sacrifice as a way to redemption, in the Christian vein. Bialik’s acquaintance with Symbolist poetry and consciousness of its Christian character motivated Bialik to express the uniqueness of the Jewish understanding of sacrifice and redemption as he understood it. Bialik was the first modern Hebrew writer to describe a mystical experience not in the frame of a Hassidic or Kabbalist way of life, but as a personal experience which he had had — in his childhood (“Brilliance”), in nature (“The Lake”) and in love (“Where Are You?” “Come Out”). In these love poems, the mystical experience is not connected with self-annihilation or death, but with an awakening of inner abundance and creativity. The only exception is “Where are You?”

The suicidal character of mystical experiences also appears in Bialik’s poem “Alone” (1902). Here — as in Feinerberg’s “The Shadows” — the *beit ha-midrash* is the place where the poet achieves intimate contact with the Jewish sacred spirit. In Bialik’s “Alone,” this spirit is symbolized by the Shekhina, who for the poet is like a broken-winged bird trying to keep her youngest fledgling

110 Bialik, *Poems 1890-1898*, pp. 95, 257-258, 332-333.

111 On depression in Bialik’s poetry see Miron, *The Departure*, pp. 60-61, 208-225, 234-345; 239-244, 255-295, 260-269, 284-285, 290-296, 300-303. Bar-Yosef, *Decadent Trends*, pp. 106-129.

112 On Symbolism in Bialik’s poetry see Nathan, *Bialik’s “The Dead of the Desert,”* pp. 120-181; Bar-Yosef, *Symbolism*, pp. 104-108; idem., “Sophiology.” On Bialik’s personal contacts with Symbolist poets, especially with Viacheslav Ivanov, see Timenchik and Kopel’man, “Ivanov and Bialik.”

— himself — from leaving her alone, after all the others have flown away to the “light.” Now he too wishes to escape from this broken, half-dead world and find a new life. Like Feiberberg, Bialik presented the devotion to study in *beit ha-midrash* as an act of self-sacrifice. In his long poem “*Ha-matmid*” Bialik criticized the ascetic way of life of the yeshiva students. He expressed his skepticism about the value of their sacrifice: “Does the *Shekhina* enjoy the *hevel* (breath/vanity) coming from the mouth of a child/ or does she mock the sacrifice (...) / of who heroically suffer martyrdom for her.” In “Alone” the *beit ha-midrash* becomes a death trap for the poet, who is the only student who remained with the *Shekhina*. In both poems, devotion and loyalty to traditional Judaism are suicidal. However, in “Alone,” the poet cannot leave the *Shekhina*, because they are an inseparable entity; he hears his own voice coming from her lips. He feels her hot tear on his shoulder and he cannot avoid it. In spite of the danger of death, he remains with her.

In Bialik’s “My Light Was Not Unearned” (1902) the poet’s inspiration and his mission as a poet demand self-sacrifice. The poet here is a heroic mythical character, and the creation of the poem is an act of redemption: the poet supplies his readers with the fire which was kindled in his heart, hit by “my axe of troubles,” as if it was a piece of heated iron (reminding the reader of both Hephaistos, the mythological blacksmith god, and Prometheus, the God who brought the heavenly fire to human beings and was severely punished for it). The light of this fire is transmitted to the readers by the poem, but the price is the poet’s burnt “flesh and blood.” The creation of poetry is here a self-burning of a sacrifice on a sacred altar, neither for the sake of unity with God nor for loyalty to the Jewish religion, but to strengthen the weakened spirit of the nation. The poet’s sacrifice, like the sacrifice of Prometheus and Jesus, is intended for the sake of all the people.

Bialik’s suicidal understanding of the poet’s mission is clearest in the long poem “The Scroll of Fire” (1905). Here the poet sacrifices the sacred fire of his love for a woman for the sake of his mission: devoting himself completely to the rescue of the national sacred spirit, symbolized by the feminine image of Morning Star. He gives up his personal desires in order to become a “prophet” (namely, a spiritual leader of his nation). Both personal love and prophetic mission are sacred and demand self-sacrifice by drowning: in “The

River of Death;” love results in drowning while accepting the national mission means living in permanent self-burning. The poet feels both options burning like fire in his heart, and chooses to use this fire and himself as instruments for national redemption. Following Feierberg, Bialik also viewed the heroic readiness to sacrifice one’s self as a condition for the continuation of Jewish sacredness. Suicidal life for the sake of the national existence was for him the role of the poet-prophets, including himself.

The price of the sacred goal is the thematic center of “The Scroll of Fire.” At the beginning of this long poem the heavenly world is depicted as dual: it is dominated, on the one hand, by a wrathful God, who destroys what he Himself has created, and on the other hand by Morning Star, a merciful and responsible feminine goddess, who takes care of the continuation of Jewish sacredness. This dualism is manifested also in the group of boys on earth. On the one hand, they are attracted to the hatred and destruction of their “angry eyelids” leader, who takes them to the “River of Death,” and on the other hand, among them there is a “bright eyelids” boy who is attracted to the Morning Star and follows her to the sacred goal. This boy — the poet’s image — is also torn by two contrasting powers, which lead him to opposing sacred goals: on the one hand love, and on the other the national mission. When he confesses his love he sees his addressee reflected in the water of the river as a divine image. He calls her “God of my life,” in contrast to the old man’s traditional Jewish “God of Heaven,” whom he is now ready to desert. Within himself the sacredness of love struggles with the sacredness of heaven. Actions of symbolic suicide express his loyalty to each: he cuts his curls and burns them as a sign of giving up his love for and devotion to the “God of Heaven,” he jumps into The River of Death as a sign of his full devotion to love. At the end of “The Scroll of Fire” the hero devotes himself to the national mission. The price is the sacrifice of love, which leaves him with a feeling of great emptiness: “And he was going bare and barefooted and looking direct, having nothing but the great fire in the depths of his soul and the obscurity of dawn in the chasms of his eyes.” He is transformed into the image of Morning Star: “And a sea of mercy was roaring in the boy’s heart, and his consolations were flowing like the morning’s dew on grieved hearts, and he was looking at them with compassion and his eyelids were the eyelids of Morning.”

The hero chooses the mission of a poet-prophet, for which he pays with his personal emotional life. Both love and the prophetic mission lead him to death, and he can only choose the worthier of the two. None of the ways leads him to redemption. In fact, the general idea of the poem is that self-sacrifice does not lead to redemption. One can only and should only sacrifice his life by working incessantly for the benefit of his people.

Two more of Bialik's works present the poet's mission or his moments of inspiration as an attraction to mystical death. These are his poem "He Peeped and Died" and his essay "Covering and Uncovering by Language," both published in late 1916. The proximity of the dates of publication allows us to use each as an interpretation of the other.

In the essay Bialik formulated his understanding of the poet as a mystic who is able to peep into the world of absolute sacred truth. The poets, whom Bialik here calls *baalei ha-remez, ha-drash ve-hasod*, alluding to Jewish mystics, endanger themselves by looking with no fear at the absolute truth hidden in a wondrous world beyond, the world of *blima* (literally: nothing, void. In Kabbalah: God. see ch. 3), a world of frightening chaos. "For no man will see Me and live' — says the chaos, and any speech, any tinge of speech, is some cover on a bit of that *blima*."¹¹³ The moment of looking at that chaos or *blima* is described by Bialik as a moment of deadly danger: "The most dangerous moment — in both speech and life — is then the one which is between one covering and another, when the chaos flickers."¹¹⁴ In contrast to the 'prose owners,' who "pass the frozen river securely," the poets resemble "one who is passing the river at thaw time, over pieces of ice which are rocking and floating (...) chaos flickers among the gaps, the foot is tethering, the danger is close —."¹¹⁵

In both this essay and the poem "He Peeped and Died" the poet is a mystic who endangers his life in order to reach the dangerous moment of peeping at the *blima*. In the essay he succeeds in walking on the edge and peeping at the chaos, while in the poem he pays with his life for the peep, which reveals nothing. In "He Peeped and Died" Bialik described a devotion unto death, maybe

113 Bialik, *Prose Writings*, pp. 20-21.

114 *Ibid.*, p. 23.

115 *Ibid.*, p. 24.

his own devotion to his mission as a poet, the price of which is life itself. He uncovered here his cruel doubts about the value of his life's project, about the beliefs by which he was directed, and about the personal price he had paid for them. The *blima* at which the hero of the poem arrives is not the world of God in the theological sense of the word, but, as in "Covering and Uncovering by Language," the same chaotic, absolute reality which the language of poetry tries to express.

In Bialik's poems "Where Are You?" (1904) and "If the Angel Asks" (1905), love is a mystical goal for which the poet is ready to die. In "Where Are You?" the beloved woman, whom the poet calls *yekhidat kha-yai u-shkхинat ma'avayai* (the only one/the soul of my life and the dwelling/Shekhina of my desires) is invited to appear, reveal herself and redeem him. Her burning presence in his heart is compared to the touch of the fire floor on Isaiah's lips (Isaiah 6:6-7). She is wrapped with similes of purity and sacredness. The poet invites her to kill him: "And one day bring me back my robbed youth/ and kill me together with my spring (...) and between your breasts I shall end my days." In this poem love is depicted as a mystical goal. It is exceptional among Bialik's love poems, in which the poet generally refrains from full devotion to love because of its excessive price ("The Hungry Eyes," "In the Twilight").

In "If the Angel Asks," the poet tells The Angel of Death about his yearnings for things which in his childhood and youth embodied sacredness for him: the white cloud, the sun beam, the tear, and the page of Talmud, symbols of things for which he devoted himself unto death. His yearning for the white cloud is described as a semi-erotic ecstasy, which almost brings him to death ("the whole world was swooning," "his [the poet's] soul went out"). The ray of sun which dances "on the wings of *zohar* (...) like a white butterfly" carries on its back the boy's soul. The study of the "sacred page of Talmud" is described as a devotion to death: "in the entrails of the dead letters my soul quivered alone." Later in the poem it becomes clear that this suicidal devotion was a stage on the way to his writing of poetry, which transformed these experiences into fountains of creative life: "in the dead letters poems of life gushed out." Here, like in "My Light Was Not Unearned" poetry is created by devotion unto death to sacredness, but the self-killing brings to revival. The poem ends with a confession, according to which one sacred temple remained

closed to the poet's soul: the temple of love. Love is here depicted as a divine being which abides in a sacred temple in heaven: "And she [the poet's soul] nestles with her wing against the gate of love (...) and prays for love." Only after his death will the poet achieve love, as he confesses to the Angel of Death who comes to take his soul.

Bialik treated with criticism the mystical tendency toward self-annihilation and death, but at the same time he treated it as his own personal trait. His attitude to suicidal mystical experience is then ambivalent: attraction to absolute devotion contrasts with anxiety, skepticism and calculations of the "price." This duality (which is, perhaps, very Jewish) is characteristic of his complex and deep poetry.

Death as a mystical redemption of a chosen few appears in three of Avraham Ben-Yitzhak's scarce poems. "As Day Descends" (written in 1909, published in 1912)¹¹⁶ describes death as part of a glorious banquet during a beautiful sunset, at the end of which the festive crowd descends to the river to see "white flowers/ preciously carried away upon the water/ from the corner of the garden they were swept/ with laughter at noon." These flowers are lost youth. Deep sadness wraps them, death comes over them, but still "from above star after star will walk upon the mountains/ and great strange night will come down on us/ and evening breeze will touch us and will coo like playing on black violins." The great strange night is death, but it is powerful, sacred and beautiful. Death is a touch of "evening breeze," which transforms the dying ones into black violins, producing music from them. Death is here described without any reservations as a situation of self-annihilation, elevation, creativity and unity with the beauty of nature and art.

Death is a redemption in Ben-Yitzhak's poem "The Lonely Say," written in the years 1910-1917¹¹⁷ (see ch. 1). Here the poet emphasizes the separateness and the leading role of the aristocratic few. In contrast to Bialik's view, the nobility of the few chosen is not based upon their devotion to the people or to literary creativity. The lonely are poets, perhaps, but redemption is not a result of their poetry. Their "song" is stopped before the moment of redemption.

116 Ben-Yitzhak, *Poems*, p. 14.

117 *Ibid.*, p. 19.

Their nobility is connected to personal moral qualities which elevate them above the mob: generosity, modesty, refinement, self-annihilation and the ability to elevate themselves above the flood of earthly life, which in several of Ben-Yitzhak's poems is described by metaphors of weariness and dying. The shadow of death hovers above life and is present very closely: "And to-morrow we shall die." Death is described as standing in front of a locked gate, an image which reminds every Jew of the prayer "Open Your gate for us" on the eve of The Day of Atonement. In a very depressing reality only the thought about unity with God after death can console. In the last stanza, the lonely who have parted from each other come back to unity: "In seven days we part and in One we return." It seems that only after their deaths will these chosen few be redeemed from their lives of loneliness, estrangement and despair, when they will return to their source, to unity with God. The happy redemption is a result of this return to the Jewish common source, which the poet envisions as possible only after death.

Ben-Yitzhak's poem "Happy Are the Ones who Sow but Will not Reap"¹¹⁸ (probably written in 1928, first published in 1930), describes redemption through self-annihilation. Redemption begins with generosity, getting rid of any interest in gaining: "Happy are the ones who sow but will not reap/ for they will wander far away// Happy are the generous (...) they have undressed themselves from all their ornaments on crossroads"; then it is expressed by modesty, which enables one to completely eradicate personal uniqueness and to give up the need for exhibition and haughtiness: "Happy are the proud whose pride have overflowed the borders of their soul/ and became like the modesty of the whiteness after the rainbow has come in the cloud// Happy are the ones who know whose hearts calls from the desert/ and on their lip the silence blooms." The spectacular colors of the rainbow are annihilated when they turn around, modestly becoming white, the color of sacredness. The end of this poem discusses the happy death of these chosen few: "Happy are they for they will be gathered into the heart of the world/ wrapped with the mantle of forgetfulness." The poet attributed sacredness to their life and death. They are the eternal sacrifice in the temple of life; in their silent self-annihilation

118 Ibid., p. 20.

and in their anonymous deaths they legislate and create the sacredness of this world. Ben-Yitzhak did not see in death a stage on the way to revival, but a sacred goal in itself, maybe a goal which returns modern Jews to Judaism for the price of the complete renunciation of their personal ambitions. In spite of the personal character of Ben-Yitzhak's poems, they were not written in the first person singular; the canceling of the self is one of the stylistic expressions of the experience itself.

Like Avraham Ben-Yitzhak, the poet and scholar Aryeh Ludwig Strauss (1892-1953) was in his youth rooted in German culture. He became close to Zionism and to Judaism only after the 1st World War, under the influence of Martin Buber. He was born in Germany, studied in the Universities of Berlin, München and Frankfurt, and taught literature in the Technical High Institute in Aachen. He was active in the periodical *Hapoel Ha-tsa'ir* and edited its German version. He married Martin Buber's daughter, and in 1935 came to Eretz-Israel and joined a *kibbutz*. He wrote poetry, stories and plays in German, translated Bialik and Peretz into German and wrote beautiful literary analysis of the psalms and other texts. In his poem "*Mi-ma'amakim*" (De Profundis)¹¹⁹ he described mystical unity through self-abandonment: "I shall not cry anymore: 'Save me, God!'/ with you I shall immerse in my abandonments/ for You I know in the darkness of my eye/ and my ear is pricked unto your mouth/ in the depths." Another poem, "Come Out, My Soul, in the Dance of the Poem,"¹²⁰ opens with the words "Return, return, Shulamit! Sing, sing, dance!/ Toward a light which revives and kills/ sing: come, my Beloved!" The Shulamit is the poet's soul, expressing its readiness to devote itself to God. But the heavenly light turns into fire and thunder, which portend death. In the poem "Days of Awe,"¹²¹ the poet expresses his readiness to meet the heavenly light while he is in the chasm which devours life — namely, in death. "I shall praise the Judge, I shall praise also His purifying and *mafshi'a* (criming, causing crime) world./ I am between life and death,/ and from the chasm which devours our lives/ I see Him — the source of life/ and I raise my chalice toward Him."

119 Strauss, *Hours and Generation*, p. 74.

120 Ibid., p. 79.

121 Ibid., pp. 181-182.

Nathan Alterman in his opening poem to “Stars Outside” informed the reader that on his way to the poetic mission he abandoned “the sheep and the doe” and instead is now worshipping “the green grove and the laughing woman and the rain-washed eyelids of tree top.”¹²² The poet here declares his loyalty to the sacredness of life and its joys, not to spiritual beings which demand self-sacrifice. The world of death is presented in “Stars Outside” as an existential point of departure, from which the poet wishes to be redeemed. Death and its presence in life frighten and threaten him; he is looking for redemption in life and its joys, but still he cannot free himself completely from death’s dominion. In the poem “In the Mountains of Silences,” death is symbolized by a feminine divine image which the poet recognizes as lying at the root of his soul: “But only your awe is my preferred kiss./ Only your strangeness is my preferred embrace!// I shall carry for you (...) my whole being,/ all my joys are in your dimple.”

Paradoxically — paradox is characteristic of Alterman’s poetry — the poet’s devotion to life is described as a devotion unto death. In “Eternal Meeting,” the meeting between the poet and the divine woman is aggressive and annihilating: “[You are] eternally sudden! (...) in a fighting street, bleeding strawberry sunsets/ you will bundle me to sheaves.” The longed-for smile, a redeeming gift from the divine woman, is dearer to the poet than his life is. He is ready to endanger himself for it, saying, “One day I shall fall down with wounded head to pick/ this smile from among the chariots.”¹²³ In the same way the worship for the divine woman is described as self-sacrifice unto death in another, untitled, poem, saying: “What is the price to my life which has crossed your waves,/ which was anxious to your voice? What to say, what to give/ to the wild sorrow which wants only you,/ handing its paws to the burning iron?” In the poem “The Three Brothers,”¹²⁴ Alterman described the way to the redeeming joy as conditioned by sacrifice. On the way to the redeeming virgin, one of the brothers is killed by the others, as payment for a smile.

This idea, that the sacred joy of life can be achieved only by the price of killing another sacredness whose face is sad, is at the center of Alterman’s

122 Alterman, *Poems from Long Ago*, p. 7.

123 *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.

124 *Ibid.*, pp. 118-121.

long poem “The Joy of the Poor.” In the opening poem¹²⁵ Joy appears as a divine unreachable being: “For you cannot see my face until your last day/ nor the enemy can see me and live.” This poem deals with the loyalty of the poet to the wife of his youth, who “is dreamt like a vengeance and aches like the body/ and pure white like the sheep of the poor.” Here death is a condition of redemption. The sacred wife, perhaps a symbol of the Diaspora, should die so that the redemptive joy will be born in Eretz-Israel.

Alterman attributed a status of sacredness to earthly joy, in contrast to mystical ascetic spirituality. He described the attitude toward happiness in terms which turned it into a mystical being. Thus he brought to extremity the Hassidic tradition according to which it is possible to serve God by joy, singing and story-telling, and even by everyday deeds. And still, Alterman’s world view is far from Hassidism, at least from the moral point of view: he viewed the joy of life and life itself as above ethics, continuing Nietzschean and Vitalistic lines of thought — which he could find in Symbolist and Post-Symbolist Russian poetry (especially in Pasternak’s) — more than in Hassidism.

The idea of revival being conditioned by sacrifice is the basis of Alterman’s view of death. It appeared earlier in ancient pagan cults which included human sacrifice, the Tamuz and Dionysus myths of death and revival, the myth of Demeter and Persephone, the story of Jesus, and the apocalyptic narrative, where cosmic catastrophe is a necessary stage on the way to the redemption of the righteous (see ch. 7). The common denominator in all of these is the belief that suffering, death and cruelty are a necessary condition for redemption. This view was combined in Zionist ideology, where the foundation of a Jewish state was treated as a sacred goal, worth any price.

Pinhas Sadeh

Pinhas Sadeh (Feldman, 1929-1994) was born in Lemberg (L’viv). He came to Eretz-Israel with his parents in 1934. The rest of his family later perished in the Shoah. He learned in a religious elementary school in Tel-Aviv and then was sent to a *kibbutz*, where he happened to read

¹²⁵ Ibid., p. 149.

—outside of school — the New Testament and the writings of Nietzsche. He fought in the War of Independence, lived one year in London, then in Jerusalem, Ramat Gan, Tel-Aviv, and back to Jerusalem. His literary prose and poetry works are the clearest and most extreme manifestations of a mystical attraction to death and self-annihilation in modern Hebrew literature.¹²⁶ Sadeh himself said that the yearning for death in his writings grew from deep depression, and was for him a means to overcome despair and to gather new powers for life:

I have written “Love Poem” in one night of darkness, a night of wild wind and storm; but the poem, more than the memory of this night of darkness, is a memory of the soul’s night of darkness... This poem is written in the tone which continues to be heard throughout the rest of *Shirei Massa Duma* [prophecies of death, 1947-1950]. This was the basic tone of my spiritual being at that time: death; the yearning for death; the dark enthusiasm for it; singing its praise. All my thought, all the feelings in my heart were squeezed into this mysterious symbol, and my spirit has never known the power of life as it knew then. Being dead for the world I felt the essence of my life. Yearning for death — this was for me a symbol of the yearning to live, the deepest, purest, strongest and sweetest form of love (...) I have reflected about death only as about a form of new life, of new birth into God...¹²⁷

Sadeh’s first literary works were written and published in the early 1950s, after the War of Independence, when many people in Israel were physically and mentally suffering, but the establishment proudly celebrated the resurrection of a Jewish state and the official foundations of independent governmental and military systems. Everywhere one could feel admiration for the agricultural settlements which were founded in the country before the foundation of the state, and for the fighters in the War of Independence, together with haughtiness toward whoever did not manage to free himself from what was considered a pathetic Jewish Diaspora look and behavior. Everyone tried to adopt the image of the healthy, fighting, happy *sabra* (native

126 Luz, *Sadeh*, pp. 75-99; Ganan, *Sadeh*.

127 Sadeh, *Life as a Parable*, pp. 125-126.

Israeli). Perhaps because of this, Pinhas Sadeh wrote almost nothing about his childhood and youth. Some hints can be found in his “Fruit Parables,”¹²⁸ where reality is a picture of “battlefields sowed with graves and wires,/ above the din of metropolis teeming with deeds and flaming with banquets, abundant with material and factories/ but so poor with love, belief and the knowledge of God.”

Sadeh’s poetry expresses his wish to disconnect from this reality and to elevate himself above it. According to his autobiographical novel, *Life as a Parable* (1958) he found the way for that in The New Testament, as well as in Nietzsche’s *Thus Spake Zarathustra* and also in the writings of Dostoevsky and Knut Hamsun.¹²⁹ He then turned to the writings of Christian saints (men and women), to the mystical poetry of William Blake and to “dark” German Romantic poetry, especially Hölderlin’s. Only late in his life did he discover Hassidic mysticism, especially Rabbi Nahman’s.

Sadeh was conscious of the difference between his view of death as redemption and the positivist civil culture in which he was educated both at school and in the *kibbutz*, where he felt himself a stranger. At the beginning he considered himself to be a prophet of radical, intentionally destructive vision, whose prophecy is his mission. He viewed his yearnings for death as not only personal but also as a theological experience, and he viewed himself as a prophet or a messenger of truth. He pictured the preference for death over life as a sign of the poet who is a “real shepherd,” who like Jesus neglected his regular sheep and went to look for the one who was lost.¹³⁰

Some of Sadeh’s poems are written in a style of philosophical preaching, with generalizations addressed to a listener whom the speaker wishes to convince of the divine sacredness of death and its superiority over life: “Out of the existence of things — does your heart not feel/ a blossom of new eternal spring? (...) Whoever passes the gates of death/ lo! He will completely dissolve with the Godly being/ and will return to his primary purity (...) Girl, you shall also return to your virginity.”¹³¹

128 Sadeh, *Poems*, p. 60.

129 Sadeh, *Life as a Parable*, pp. 70-71.

130 *Ibid.*, pp. 85-86.

131 Sadeh, *Poems*, p. 58.

The title of the poem, “The Poet Is leading the Youth Astray,”¹³² perhaps hints at a parallel between the poet and Socrates, who was accused by the Athens’ authorities of leading the youth of Athens astray and committed suicide before the verdict was carried out. The poem turns to the reader with persuasions to enter the world of darkness which is the place of God, to hear God’s sad voice, which is sobbing like an organ, to listen to the “awful song” which is the root of the human soul, and to disconnect from all feelings of love and nostalgia for earthly things. Hearing the beautiful voice of death is conditioned on giving up love for women — “sister, bride or mother” — and estrangement from their feelings: “Let us cut off the mercy of mother from our heart/ and the consolation of bride from our flesh (...) let us throw a stone at their memory/ let us throw their memory like a stone/ and call mother to the stone in the field.” This estrangement from the memory of the mother for the sake of another sacredness reminds one of Jesus’ words about the desired attitude of sons to their mothers and the rest of their family members (“And every one that hath forsaken houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my name’s sake, shall receive an hundredfold, and shall inherit everlasting life,” Matthew 19:29)¹³³ and of Nietzsche’s war with civil mediocre morality.

The call for cruel renunciation of conventional family relationships for the sake of a sacred ideal was not Sadeh’s innovation in the context of Zionism; Sadeh could also look back to Gnessin and Brenner, writers whom he knew and highly appreciated, and see similar calls. However, the combination of this philosophy within a theology of Death and ecstatic suicidal devotion to death are unique to Sadeh’s early literary work. In many poems in the cycle “Poems of Speech About Death,” death is a divine, absolute, sacred being, an eternal, omnipotent, consoling, beautiful, pure and loving image. In the poem “The Angel,”¹³⁴ death is pictured as an angel riding on a heavenly horse “with ease and glory,” his face the face of a girl and his toes white as lilies, holding in his hand a sword which is “cut from the body of the sun.” He waves it on all the

132 Ibid., pp. 44-46.

133 See also Mark 3:34-35, 10:29.

134 Sadeh, *Poems*, pp. 136-137.

nations, on all human beings, on all the disasters of this world, whether passing or eternal. This picture alludes to the pale horse on whose back Death rides in Revelation 6:8. There, however, Death is just one of four riders, each representing another face of Evil, and all of them will be conquered at last by the sacred powers of light, then the righteous will live forever, and death will disappear from the world. In Sadeh's poem, in contrast, one can find an aesthetic and erotic idealization of death. Here Sadeh depicts death as a desired, feminine, beautiful and cruel Goddess.

In his poems Sadeh defined his poetic style and his basic stance toward reality: he did not wish to praise nature and the beauty of the girls, which like the beauty of a fire can burn a house; nor did he want to praise "whatever raises a smile of happiness on the lips." He wanted to sing the sadness and weeping of the blood, for all our joys will turn at last into "a jelly of weeping/ when God will gaze at them/ through the absolute transparent crystal of eternity." At the end of the day, "all yearnings are attracted to death."¹³⁵

Sadeh's point of departure was a deep hostility to the material earthly existence and mediocre civil life. He described this life as a permanent escape from the consciousness of its despairing, degrading, hypocritical, corrupt, ugly and dull essence. For the poet life is a hell, a nightmare from which human beings are incessantly running away: "And we have nothing to do with light, and day, and life,/ and with the wisdom of day/ which is the wisdom of life/ which is the cunning of a dog."¹³⁶ The voice of death is "full of sweet purity, a voice full of dreamlike love, a voice/ full of wild nausea of life."¹³⁷ The expression "wild nausea" signifies the intensity and the authenticity of young Sadeh's hatred for life. Perhaps it also expresses his suicidal mentality in this period of his life.

In his autobiographical long poem "The New Jerusalem Poem," Sadeh described his feelings in the period when he lived in London: "When will the end of this hellish misfortune come, will he come [at all]? (...) Maybe you have to join the Communist party?/ Maybe you should eat and drink, for to-morrow you are going to die?// To-morrow you'll die... to-morrow you'll die.../ Do

135 Ibid., p. 48.

136 Ibid., p. 13.

137 Ibid., p. 80.

you not want, perhaps to die already now?” These reflections lead the poet to a simulation of a happy suicide in a lake surrounded by beautiful sights.¹³⁸ Another period of his life, when he lived in Tel-Aviv as a bohemian, was also described as a suicide: “Dive deep, deep/ into the pre-existence of life, into the wild pre-existence of death.”¹³⁹ In another poem, Sadeh formulated, in addition to his personal experiences, his pessimistic philosophy: “In fact what is the human being, what is the human being? And the world what!/ An infinite desert of ice is the world, and our way of life on it/ is only a thread of blood.”¹⁴⁰

Sadeh visited a religious elementary school, but the facts of his life led him to feel that there is no God who rules the world. Nietzsche’s teaching proved to him that God is dead: “But the One who is sitting in heaven laughed (...) I have heard, I have heard His laughter of disdain, and I have seen Him trembling like a rope before the hanging (...) and perhaps he is dead// Blessed be He the True Judge!”¹⁴¹

Sadeh’s anger at the lack of justice in this world joined that of other Israeli poets — Yehuda Amichai, Nathan Zach, David Avidan and Dan Pagis — who began to publish their writings after the foundation of the state. But in contrast to them, Sadeh did not give up his yearnings for the presence of sacredness in the world, and he expressed these yearnings with the characteristic ecstasy of mystical experiences. In his novel *Life as a Parable*, Sadeh expressed his pessimistic view in essay style:

People exist within despair like fish in water, perhaps not knowing about the essence of despair more than fish know about the essence of water (...) And I am not speaking here about the great poverty of earth, about all the pain and sadness, about the misery of lovers, the anxiety of the outcasts, on the suffering of deserted women, on the bereavement of every individual who survives the difficult, frail existence, which resembles this dream. Not on that; but on when I look and see a man sitting at the table and eating a fat chicken, and his fingers are dripping grease, and his fat cheeks are smeared with oil, and in his

138 Ibid., p. 115.

139 Ibid., p. 119.

140 Ibid., p. 88.

141 Ibid., p. 18.

eyes a greasy smile glitters, something inside me is saying: “look in what an unfathomable despair this man sits.” And when I see people building houses, furnish their apartments, go to the theater, listen to radio, etc., and are elected to the *Knesset* [the Israeli parliament] something in me says: “look in what unfathomable despair these are immersed.” Like a person who is immersed in his dream, so the world is immersed in despair.¹⁴²

Young Sadeh often repeated the idea that earthly life is devoid of reality and is nothing but a dream, an idea which was most clearly and systematically formulated by Schopenhauer in his *The World as Will and Representation* (1818) and which was widely echoed in European neo-Romantic literature. Following Schopenhauer, Sadeh wrote: “For man perishes like a comet in this world of his (...) he dreams much... he is dreaming his whole life.”¹⁴³ Sadeh formulated this feeling with the aid of citations from the book of Ecclesiastes: “For [humanity] has not, for it has no need in what is under the sun, which is a bad dream and a bad matter and its end is reaping and threshing.”¹⁴⁴ Out of this feeling that life is but a dream, and out of suicidal yearnings for love, the poet discovered in himself yearnings for another world, the world of death, which is a world of light. In *Life as a Parable*, life itself is death in a certain sense, a world of dreamlike death. The narrator dreams that he is walking in a way which leads southward, towards an endless sea, and on his way he sees women plucking chickens and an Arab sitting by a clay hut by an orchard, near deserted grounds. He arrives at black iron gates. Near them stands an ageless man wearing khaki clothes and a khaki cap, looking like a grocery assistant. This man says, “This is south and these are the gates of death,” and then, “when the first snow gathers you will see the iron junks, which are the lost souls of the dead.”¹⁴⁵ He explains that life resembles a dog of hell barking inside ourselves, from which we are constantly running away. Therefore life should be destroyed: “What we should do then is to cut off this dog’s head and to destroy him by not basing our existence on matter.”¹⁴⁶

142 Sadeh, *Life as a Parable*, p. 50.

143 Sadeh, *Poems*, p. 96.

144 *Ibid.*, p. 56.

145 Sadeh, *Life as a Parable*, pp. 47-48.

146 *Ibid.*, p. 51.

In “Love Poem,”¹⁴⁷ life is a source of misery and sadness, and only reflections about death help to overcome it: “Even if we have dealt with the business of the body, and we bargained, and ate and drank and committed adultery/ *atsevet* (sadness, melancholy) darkened our soul.” The word *atsevet* is used here perhaps because its form resembles words which signify illnesses. Later in the poem the poet is tortured by his disappointed love. His yearnings are burning in him, and this is why he celebrates his devotion to thoughts about death and the unreality of the world. He imagines his death together with his beloved’s. He turns to the reader to help him convince his dead beloved that her grave “is not cold... not cold... not even dark.”¹⁴⁸ The poet’s obstinate denial of the facts dismisses the power of his love and the pain of loss. His mystical experience is a devotion to pain and misery, which brings him to spiritual elevation. The consciousness of the world’s dreamlike character is part of his redemption: “The world will become a dream, and the dream will be the world./ and (...) you will sleep in the blue palace of your own being.”¹⁴⁹

Sadeh views enduring misery on earth while giving up the struggle for joy in life and devoting himself to the feeling of suffering unto death as the only way to redemption. In one of his earliest poems, he described his way to God through disappointed love, which brought him to suicidal thought, thus: “I saw Your face (...) and I understood, and I said: this is the hour doomed for breaking down the house of my life.”¹⁵⁰ Out of this state of mind reality became a dream for him, and his beloved was transformed into a divine image. His pain, which he tried to control by drinking, turned into a torture which brought spiritual joy. In the poem “Speaking Evil of Life”¹⁵¹ Sadeh wrote: “I shall praise the landscapes of another reality,/ which is beyond streets, markets and stone/ (...) and the yearned-for, the sacred yearned-for one which is beyond Good and Evil (...) and is burning and being refined in the fire sheets of our miseries.” In “The Dead Dog’s Speech”¹⁵² the poet describes his

147 Sadeh, *Poems*, pp. 37-43.

148 *Ibid.*, p. 43.

149 *Ibid.*, pp. 90-91.

150 *Ibid.*, p. 54.

151 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

152 *Ibid.*, p. 20.

way to redemption through devotion to suffering and asceticism. He rejects the seduction of the goddess Ashtoreth, a symbol of feminine sexuality, and prefers to wrap himself in the burning iron of voluntary suffering: "Be quiet, my soul, be quiet, wrap in iron, my soul./ In the burning iron./ Why do you come out, why do you come out to sit in the banquet of joys/ of the sons of earth while you are not invited/ (...) This is why I have become poorer than all, and a wind of bereavement is howling in the rooms of my soul." In *Life as a Parable*, Sadeh explained the meaning of this poem thus:

"The Dead Dog's Speech" tells about the acceptance of a burden of a certain experience: suffering. For the black roots of suffering are those which grow the golden fruit of poetry, of charm, of spirit and sacredness. (...) I feel that suffering is the center of God in this world. I did not escape suffering, and to say the truth there was even a certain secret longing in me for it, in its various manifestations: in loneliness, anxiety, departure, civil failure, sin.¹⁵³

The voluntary acceptance of suffering and death as inevitable facts is then the way to redemption for young Sadeh. Only this can free man from the emotional tortures of earthly existence. "The fountain of God's soul is death - / and whoever denies me is a slave to the fear of death// But the believer will not be ashamed and will not be afraid/ for life is for him just a dream/ and death is for him a crown/ with which Divinity will crown him on the day of his heart's joy."¹⁵⁴ Here the idea is emphasized by a style which imitates prophecies in the New Testament.

In another poem the idea that only death is the real happiness is formulated by generalizations which begin with the word *ashrei* (happy is he who), alluding to the famous Psalm. Sadeh wrote: "Happy are those who lose their soul [also: suicide] in order to find it again, and forever, in Him./ Happy are those who do not mind their eating in time and have no need for joys/ (...) happy are they, who through suffering and doubt and impurity they strive, as long as the soul is their body, to find His sacred will,/ love, mercy, death.// They will come to peace, they will lie in the right place, their memory will be lost in the

153 Sadeh, *Life as a Parable*, p. 124.

154 Sadeh, *Poems*, p. 14.

darkness/ and they will relax — for sweet is darkness, and good for the eyes (...) Open to them a gate when the gate is being closed, for the day turns away./ the day will turn away, the sun will come and turn away, and they will enter your gates.”¹⁵⁵ This poem also alludes to Jesus’ preaching on the mountain in Matthew ch. 5 and to Ecclesiastes. The difference between the Biblical view and Sadeh’s is clear: in Psalms ch. 1, the happy man is living like a tree which was planted on rivers and whose fruit ripens in time, while here happiness depends on the renunciation of life and its joys. It is interesting to compare this poem with Ben-Yitzhak’s poem, “Happy are Those Who Sow But Do Not Reap.”¹⁵⁶ Both poems include four sentences which begin with the word *ashrei* and a concluding sentence which begins with *ashreihem* (they are happy), and both poems allude to the same prayer, “Open to Us a Gate,” which is said on the eve of the Day of Atonement. Both poets admire those who are able to distance themselves from the din of life, but Ben-Yitzhak’s ideal character is generous and modest, while Sadeh attributed mercy only to God, not to the person who devoted himself to Him. Sadeh focused on anxiety and suffering, while Ben-Yitzhak raised questions about the modern moral situation. Unlike Ben-Yitzhak, Sadeh said that the human way to God leads not only through suffering and death, but also through “impurity,” namely sin. This view of *mitzvah ha-ba’ah ba-aveira* (a religious achievement through sin) has its root in Jewish mysticism, especially in Sabbateanism.¹⁵⁷ Sadeh could have learnt it also from Nietzsche’s *Thus Spake Zarathustra*.

Sadeh’s acceptance and idealization of death grew from his great hatred for life and the suffering it causes: “Why should I fear death and he is not fearful. He is not/ contaminated like life. He is laughing in our eyes (...) He arrives like a groom and his canopy/ is haloing on our heads.// He is coming like a shepherd and plays the flute,/ hearing it our soul comes out.”¹⁵⁸ Alluding to the Pied Piper of Hamelin, the poet here emphasizes the seductive power of death.

Sadeh concretely described redemption in death as an experience of sensual, pagan intermixture with cosmic spaces. The dimensions of the self

155 Ibid., pp. 66-67.

156 Ben-Yitzhak, p. 20.

157 Scholem, *Mitsva*; Elior, “The Book of the Master,” pp. 487-494.

158 Sadeh, *Poems*, p. 38.

widen and become God-like: “Here my time has come, and here all the gates of spring were opened./ Night will wrap me with incense and cover my head with constellations/ infinite arms the sweet to pain earth is spreading.// The end is arriving. Distant all./ Let us say farewell to each other./ The cosmos is drowning in gloom. Here the hour of my redemptions is coming./ Brethren, let me die.”¹⁵⁹ Sadeh used here Biblical verb forms (*ya-ateini*, *egva-a*) and rare words (*yak'khiv*, *eifat*) which create an archaic impression and a mythical-pagan atmosphere.

Sadeh imagined death as an erotic experience. The above cited “and death is for him a crown/ with which Divinity will crown him on the day of his heart’s joy” alludes to The Song of Songs 3:11: “Come out and see, daughters of Zion, King Solomon wearing the crown with which his mother adorned him on the day of his marriage and the day of his joy.” In this erotic situation the poet is passive. In the third “Love Poems,” the meeting with God takes place after the poet turns restlessly on his bed at night, wrapped with “sheets of fire,” then hears “a tender caressing voice/ like rustling of forests and a mumble of love.” Towards the end of this poem his soul is ready for the meeting. The reader expects a meeting with God, but the poem concludes with the words “So my soul is standing still waiting for the groom of her youth — for death.”¹⁶⁰ Death exchanges roles with the beloved, expressing feelings which the poet expects to find in his beloved when he is in despair and frightened: “An unfathomable mysterious tenderness is already looking from good eyes/ through the drops of rain:/ death.”¹⁶¹

Death is compared by the poet sometimes to a virgin and sometimes to mother earth. These two images can be exchanged within one poem: “You [death] are the ancient mother in whose bosom we shall all relax./ You are love.”¹⁶² Making use of the New Testament parables, Sadeh compared life to the ten virgins who have come out toward their groom. The wise ones dressed themselves with ornaments of sadness while the foolish ones put ornaments of merriment. The groom loathed the foolish and cast them away shamefully,

159 Ibid., 50.

160 Ibid., pp. 39-40.

161 Ibid., p. 24.

162 Ibid., p. 64.

while “the sad one he will favor/ and gather to his bosom.”¹⁶³ The groom is God, of course, and the poet is like these wise brides: when he feels that his body is a grave and his lips are a burial stone, he adorns himself in honor of God.

The metaphor of burial as a return to a mother’s bosom can also be found in Israeli poems about the deaths of soldiers killed in wars. One of these poems (which was also often read in ceremonies), Ayin Hillel’s “To a Friend’s Soul,” opens with the words “Hayim,/ here you are coming back to your mother,/ to the earth whom you loved” and later in the poem says “and you enter the circle of the earth’s blossoms and crops, to the circle of eternity.”¹⁶⁴ In such poems death is a necessary stage in the process of revival, and the dead soldiers are seeds which will blossom together with the realization of the Zionist dream. This Zionist narrative does not give up the active role of the dead soldier in reality; it also does not view his death as a voluntary act. Sadeh, however, in his early poetry rejected this narrative, even when he used it. He wrote: “Let my flesh be soil and flowers (...) also my soul, weary of anxiety, in sweet love sleep,/ wrapped with pure white sheets/ will be carried up by angels.”¹⁶⁵ The consolation here is not the return of the body to earth, even if it is transformed into flowers, but in the rise of the soul to heaven. Sadeh showed the seductive and suicidal character of the comparison between the tomb’s soil and a mother’s bosom. When he wrote about the soldiers who were killed in the War of Independence he did adopt the idea that death is a loving bosom, and even the idea that the dead are seeds which will bear fruit, but for him the fruit of death was neither the life of those who go on living nor the realization of the Zionist dream, but an absolute goal for itself: “*Fruit we shall give, a sacrifice to God,/ which embodying the idea of death - / Lo here is God*” (underlined in the original).¹⁶⁶ Sadeh’s happy death was — psychologically speaking — a regressive experience, a return to mother’s bosom or womb. For him death wraps one with the misty veil of eternal mother, letting him sleep in “the green water cradle,”¹⁶⁷ alluding to Lethe, the mythological river of forgetfulness in Hades, the world of death.

163 Ibid., p. 49.

164 Hillel, *The Country of Noon*, pp. 49-50.

165 Sadeh, *Poems*, p. 143.

166 Ibid., p. 163.

167 Ibid., p. 81.

In the poem "In Front of the Sea,"¹⁶⁸ Sadeh described his yearnings for intermixture with God as a readiness for suicide by drowning. Together with this passive drive, other drives, more aggressive, take part in this experience. In "Five Parables of Sleep" these yearnings include primitive destructive instincts together with sleeping, returning to the cradle and passive eroticism: "Sleep came to me like a girl dressed in blue (...) why should I fear? Or hesitate? My heart tells me to jump into the water/ and to be peaceful, with no more nausea and concern, into its chasm. (...) Sleep comes out to me from dark forests/ lie like a huge monkey, drunk of war, a torch in his hand./ He is running and burning the houses, the shops, the books and the clothes."¹⁶⁹

Voluntary death can also be found in Sadeh's poetry as part of absolute, suicidal devotion to a beloved woman who is like a goddess to him. "Poem of Your Feet"¹⁷⁰ opens with a comparison of the beloved white feet to "white roses of death" and ends with the poet's readiness to die under these feet: "Please pass, sacred and pagan, among the beds of my pale roses/ and tread them down to the soil./ They will be happy to wither under your feet - / for this is their blossom/ into another reality." The poet's roses are yearning for "the miracle of blossom" which will come through "dying/ through kiss of blood into your feet." Such suicidal devotion reminds one of Bialik's poem "Where Are You?," specifically the lines "And under your lips let my sparkle die/ And between your breasts my day will die." In a book which includes his radio talks about Bialik, Sadeh wrote about this poem: "The realization of the poet's love is also self-destruction, his love is connected to death." Later he explained that in Bialik's poem death is a disconnection from sacredness.¹⁷¹ This is the point of difference between the two poets: Bialik viewed love and death as a betrayal of a sacred goal, while for Sadeh both as one lead to a mystical unification with the divine being.

Death in Sadeh's poems is sometimes pictured as a legendary, peaceful and happy place, in which one is free from the anxieties of human existence. This is the child's world of imagination. In "Life as a Parable" Sadeh reconstructed

168 Ibid., pp. 76-77.

169 Ibid., p. 72.

170 Ibid., p. 23.

171 Sadeh, *Bialik's poems*, pp. 203, 211.

his childhood yearning for death. He describes a child's visit to a therapist. The therapist is speaking to him, but the child does not hear, being immersed in fantasies while his eyes follow a flying bee:

And how peaceful is the bee's movements. She was in a completely other world, a world, which is special for her, enclosed and mysterious, and at the same time I was also in the same world (...) I felt that in any moment I can open a port and enter a world where no human hand can reach and catch me, a world of falling mulberries and blossoming violet flowers, where a soft light is poured on a wall and a bee is floating to and fro without any voice... how wonderful could be death if it came to me at that hour.¹⁷²

Death as a pure aesthetic experience can also be found in Sadeh's "Love Poem."¹⁷³ Here death is compared to the voice of a flute (again alluding to the Pied Piper), "Pure as pearls and hot like the heart of a rose (...) Oh, these are the essences of yearned-for beauty."

Sadeh described the yearning for death and the sweet fantasies of happy death as part of his youth. In *Life as a Parable*, he wrote that these fantasies were first born from the wish to escape from suffering failure in love. The writer experienced death as a mystic revelation through the pain of yearning for love:

When I was lying on the grass like that something strange happened to me: a deep feeling (or maybe it was a revelation) of death suddenly hit my whole being like lightning. There is no possibility to describe — it was absorbed with some sweet, wild, infinitely heavy sweetness, a terrible sweetness, sucking. The thing disappeared in a flash.¹⁷⁴

This experience continued to accompany and dominate his earthly life: "It seemed as if the spiritual suckled its vitality from the earthly, and as much as the latter became less and less, so the earlier went fuller and fuller."¹⁷⁵ In the narrator's consciousness the failure of love joins with the failure which he had

172 Sadeh, *Life as a Parable*, p. 42.

173 Sadeh, *Poems*, p. 39.

174 Sadeh, *Life as a Parable*, p. 84.

175 Ibid.

in his “civil life,” while fantasies of death were for him the place where “I could fortify my inner, artistic existence (...) and so I understood, after a while, that in fact my tortures were nothing but pangs of birth: *the birth of spirit from the pains of the yearnings of the flesh...*” (underlined in the original).¹⁷⁶

The result of this process, in which death is idealized and viewed as pure and sacred and as a superior spiritual consoling power over the anxieties and the corruption of this world, is clearly expressed in the cycle “Love Poem,”¹⁷⁷ which was also written in Sadeh’s youth, in the early 1950s. Death in this poem is God. The cycle begins with a description of bells’ sounds, resembling the ringing of church bells, which cheer up the poet: “And who will hear and not be glad (...) the sound of the bells of *death?*/ The redeeming death, the eternal wind [spirit] which blows from beyond” (underlined in the original). Here the poet identifies death with God, with whom his soul is yearning to unite. And in fact, throughout the poem the poet’s yearnings and the meeting of his soul with death are described by expressions which are used to describe the mystical meeting with God: “From the time I came out from my mother’s womb I always *shiviti* (I imagined) Your face in front of me.”¹⁷⁸ The word *shiviti* alludes to *Shiviti Ha-shem lenegdi tamid* (I have always seen God before my eyes, Psalms 16:8), which is often embroidered on the *parochet* in the synagogue. The poet’s expectation of death is described as a bride’s expectation of her bridegroom’s arrival, alluding to Shlomo Alkabetz’s famous mystical poem *Lekha Dodi* (Come Out, My Beloved). Uniting with death, the soul is purified and filled with light: “And my soul illuminates/ like a pearl in the body’s shell,/ she undresses the rags of impurity/ and covers herself with purity.”

Sadeh used the expression “to be flooded by oceans of light,” which Bialik in his “Zohar” used for the meeting of the child with the zephyrs, as a metaphor for his unity with death. Instead of Bialik’s happy group of legendary zephyrs who carry the child to imaginary happy spaces, Sadeh introduced a redeeming, suffering God like Jesus, bleeding, pricked by thorns, who carries the poet to the world of death which is also a world of love and mercy: “Thorns at his

176 Ibid.

177 Sadeh, *Poems*, pp. 37-43.

178 Ibid., p. 40.

feet, and the sea is blue/ for God's eyes are shedding tears./ For he sees all, but forgives all,/ for he understands/ that I can't bear any more."¹⁷⁹ The same idea of God who is full of mercy appears in the image of a shepherd holding a flute, playing an attractive tune.¹⁸⁰

Sadeh clearly followed the Christian tradition, but while in Christianity the death of Jesus and his resurrection make up the climax of a redemption story, for Sadeh suffering and death are redemption itself. They are connected with fantasies of beauty and of erotic and motherly love, devoid of moral obligations. Throughout Sadeh's writing, one can find sympathy and high evaluation of early Christianity, of Jesus and Christian mystics,¹⁸¹ as well as of Moslem mysticism.¹⁸² This is not in sympathy for historical Christianity, but a search for mystical sacredness beyond the religious establishment. Sadeh considered himself as "the Jews' Jew (...) some extreme concentration of the Jewish racial traits (...) I feel close in my work to the works of the Biblical prophets (...) this is the only way a writer or a poet can go when he tries to interpret the divine laws as they are manifested in our earthly life (...) Earth is our mother and God is our father."¹⁸³ In order to express this search Sadeh sometimes combined Christian and Jewish symbols of sacredness. For example: "And so I left the terrestrial Jerusalem in order to look for the New Jerusalem./ I left the land of Egypt to wander in the deserts of the world/ to celebrate the Passover of the soul."¹⁸⁴ Sometimes he even combined Pagan with Jewish and Christian motifs: "The Gods, from their furthest abode, call the poet (...) to come and build his home in heaven (...) to climb to the farm church (...) and to walk, in Shabbat mornings, over the wide meadows of heaven."¹⁸⁵ Here the Gods, the Church and the Jewish Shabbat live in harmony, building a common ideal world.

The development of Sadeh's literary work shows a gradual calming down of the yearnings for death. Already in his autobiographical long poem "Poem of

179 Ibid., p. 30.

180 Ibid., p. 38.

181 On Sadeh's attitude to Christianity see Luz, *Sadeh*, pp. 192-207; Ganan, *Sadeh*, pp. 86-87.

182 Sadeh, *A Journey in Eretz-Israel*, p. 88.

183 Ben-Ezer, *Sadeh*, p. 141.

184 Sadeh, *Poems*, p. 96.

185 Ibid., p. 95.

New Jerusalem,” which was written in 1954, there are signs which show that for the poet life and death are similarly sacred. Such were his reflections as he was sailing abroad: “And you utter your thoughts like a fish, while your corporeality, like a white mat ship/ above the sacred sea plane of life and death/ with much emotion will sail, will sway.”¹⁸⁶ Self-annihilation is described here not as yearnings for death but as a situation which can be achieved within life, whether by wild debauchery or by contact with nature: “You flood with the rain, knock with the drops on your window / and melt with them. You lose yourself, you become nothing. And you get up with the cock-crow, and with the sun shine / you will shine on the wet roads.”¹⁸⁷

In Sadeh’s poems from the late 1960s, a new attitude to earth and to life appears. Sadeh wrote: “When you see a person sowing and a bending woman plucking the fruit,/ and the growing and reaping and the budding and withering,/ then you will understand, human being, that you should die close to earth./ For she is a woman. And is crowned with flowers, and a rivulet of water between her breasts./ And because far from her there is no place to die./ And far from her there is no place to die.”¹⁸⁸ Here, as in earlier poems, death is an ideal situation, but its redeeming power is attributed not to a transcendent divine being. Real earth is here a sacred feminine divinity. The value of life appears, like a new thing to a small child who learns their names: “Here is life. This is earth./ And again tell yourself: Here is life. And what is beneath it is earth.” The poet praises earth and life, and feels grateful for them: “Say then: this is life and this is earth/ and thank the Gods for it.”¹⁸⁹

The mystical experience is changed in this context. It is now based not on death but on the wonder and beauty of life. Sadeh wrote: “I have seen the gold descending on the trees to bless them (...) and I have seen the earth’s beauty while it is being created.”¹⁹⁰ In another poem written in this period he wrote: “Look at the wonder and see:/ God added *aleh al aleh* (leaf over leaf).”¹⁹¹ The

186 Ibid., p. 98.

187 Ibid., p. 126.

188 Ibid., p. 167.

189 Ibid., p. 167.

190 Ibid., p. 170.

191 Ibid., p. 170.

word game *aleh al aleh* echoes Amir Giboa's poem "Birth" (see ch. 1), with its happy meeting of the child with God and its joy of the growth after the rain. Death is viewed here as "the hour of chasm. And the horror. The hour of the worm,"¹⁹² while life is a tiny moment of witness which should not be missed before going to sleep in death.

However, idealization of death reappears in Sadeh's novel *The Death of Avimelech and his Ascension to Heaven in His Mother's Arms* (1970). In Sadeh's version of the Biblical Avimelech story (Judges 9: 53-55), the face of the woman who threw a stone on Avimelech and killed him seems at first similar to the hero's mother's face. But this happens to be a delusion: his real mother descends from heaven and carries him with her. At last "the beautiful face of his redeeming mother looked completely like the face of his killing mother (...) and so it was possible to see the two mothers as one."¹⁹³ Avimelech was redeemed of his sufferings when the two women became one. Sadeh said of this novel that "Avimelech aspires to die. Death is for him the return to the world of dream, to the real source of life (...) the girl who throws the stone at Avimelech from the tower of Tevetz is similar to his mother, and he dives in the girl-mother like a stone in water, and he is united with her, he returns to his source."¹⁹⁴

In poems which are included in his book of fictional letters and poems, *To Two Dear Ladies* (1977), Sadeh again showed that the world is nothing but shadows and dreams.¹⁹⁵ Death appears in the form of a golden girl who leads the poet to a beautiful and happy death.¹⁹⁶ However, there are a few poems which express a girl's yearnings for death, and their simplistic point of view suggest that the poet himself treats these feelings with irony. In other poems the identification of God with death is treated with repulsion, sometimes in a style that parodies the mystical attitude to death.¹⁹⁷

A clear change in Sadeh's attitude toward death and life can be found in those of his poems which were written in the 1980s. In his *The Book of Yellow Pears*

192 Ibid., p. 171.

193 Sadeh, *Avimelech*, p. 96.

194 Ben-Ezer, *Sadeh*, p. 95.

195 Sadeh, *To Two Dear Ladies*, pp. 20, 30.

196 Ibid., pp. 34, 37.

197 Ibid., p. 66.

(1985), a compilation of poems and prose texts, he raised doubts about the ascetic way of life and the idealization of death. In “Kierkegaard’s Angel”¹⁹⁸ Sadeh criticized Kierkegaard’s decision to give up his love for the girl to whom he was engaged in favor of devoting himself to religious life and following the example of Avraham’s sacrifice to God. The poet plays the role of an angel who was sent to prevent Kierkegaard from self-sacrifice, in the same way that Avraham was prevented from sacrificing his son by an angel. He is sorry for not finding Kierkegaard in time. In “The Death Is,”¹⁹⁹ Sadeh quoted from Swami Sivananda’s book on Indian death sayings, which encourage one not to fear death. The poet comments that the only flaw in these views — as in other writings about life after death — is that they were put on paper by living human beings, who do enjoy life. I would have treated these words much more seriously, says the narrator, had they been said by someone who has experienced death himself. In this book Sadeh gave expression to his love and appreciation for life. In a prose text which bears the title “To Life: Written in a Summer Night In a Jerusalem Attic, on my Nineteenth Birthday” Sadeh wrote at the age of 56: “My life, my proud sweet life! Be God and son of yourself, be mother and home and homeland.”²⁰⁰ The existential human situation is now mockingly described thus: “A monkey is running among the graves! Do you hear his wailing? He is wailing into the sweet smell of life.”²⁰¹ Sadeh goes so far as to confess that even in moments of thinking about suicide, he always was very much afraid of death.²⁰² He justified his survival by saying that there is no difference between life and death.²⁰³ In another text he expressed happiness for merely being alive.²⁰⁴

In his last collection of poems, *Ich Zing vie a Foigele* (1993), 64-year-old Sadeh revealed the falsity of the pessimistic ideas about life which he had adopted in his youth. In the poem “Theogenes, the Sixth Century A.D.,”²⁰⁵ the

198 Sadeh, *The Book of Yellow Pears*, pp. 6-8.

199 Ibid., p. 91.

200 Ibid., p. 102.

201 Ibid., p. 160.

202 Ibid., p. 176.

203 Ibid., p. 31.

204 Ibid., p. 177.

205 Sadeh, *Ich Zing Vie a Feigele*, p. 37.

poet mentions the agreement of opinions between Theogenes of Megara, the Greek poet who wrote elegies, and the author of the biblical Ecclesiastes about the superiority of death over life, but the poet answers them: “But the light, the light. The air. This hour, when I am scrabbling these words.” In another poem, the poet writes of his love for the works of the Greek poet Constantine Cavafy which “make efforts to express life for itself (...) maybe the sad sacredness of ephemeral life.” Cavafy’s death, says the poet, is not his way to redemption: “In the grave/ there is no love, no warmth, no life. In the grave there is just nothing.”²⁰⁶ In contrast, the poet describes the heroic death of Amnon of Magtensa, who was ready to suffer terrible tortures when he refused to abandon Judaism, and even justified his fate in a prayer which he wrote.²⁰⁷

In this last book of poems, Sadeh found absolute and sacred happiness in small actions which he had experienced on earth, even if they were routine and habitual, such as walking alone in the fields from Ramat Rachel to Tsur Bakher during sunset at the age of sixteen;²⁰⁸ a dream about making love to a girl;²⁰⁹ or seeing children jumping in the rain.²¹⁰ Philosophical generalizations about the nothingness of life seemed to him now ridiculous, childish and silly.²¹¹ Sadeh portrayed himself on a peaceful afternoon in Jerusalem, when “unheedingly it occurred to me that I could now be in the darkness, under the soil./ and I said in my heart ‘My soul, bless God,’”²¹² (an expression which is often repeated in the Psalms and in Jewish prayers). A passing woman who asked him for the time received his blessing “Let *Ha-shem* (God) give you many more days.”²¹³ Reflecting on a script written on a Greek tomb, the poet concluded that when death is approaching, a person becomes interested not in spiritual matters but

206 Ibid., p. 38.

207 Ibid., p. 43. On the versions of this story and on his historical background see Yovel, “The Historian’s Silence.”

208 Ibid., p. 5.

209 Ibid., p. 6.

210 Ibid., p. 20.

211 Ibid., p. 26.

212 Ibid., p. 11.

213 Ibid., p. 14.

in belonging to other people and pleasing them.²¹⁴ He looks at young nuns and decides that in fact they wish to join each other's fates, not to disconnect from life.²¹⁵ In a poem titled "A Viper, 27.1.91" Sadeh hears Jewish martyrs and those who perished in the Shoah blessing their descendants, who "are not at your wits' end as we were./ And you have the power, and you sit on your own land./ You are our consolation, as much as any consolation is possible."²¹⁶

In this book of poems, Sadeh expressed a mood of peaceful acceptance of everyday Jewish life, devoid of ecstasy, in which death is received with reconciliation. From this point of view whatever is beyond the existence of the here and now is devoid of reality: "What does a man need. Some oranges. Olives. Mathias herring from the barrel. / (...) Far away, in some space, the cosmos is floating in the darkness./ I think I am going to buy one kilogram oranges. Maybe some pitas."²¹⁷ The poet's yearnings now focus on the possibility that he could have had "now a child of, say, five or six years,"²¹⁸ or even on the continuation of living, together with the heat of summer and the coldness of winter.²¹⁹ He is grateful for the mere fact that he is not dead and buried, even for the sake of reading a detective novel.²²⁰ Sometimes death still seems to him "a metaphysical consolation," but he doubts the possibility that a human — even Nietzsche — could seriously embrace it with his mind. Like complete silence, death is beyond the human ken, and the poet no longer wishes to transmit it with words.²²¹ On the verge of an existential chasm, he does not disconnect himself from the terrestrial point of view; he has no more fantasies about an ideal world. Beyond the terrestrial there is only silence, he says.²²² Even when he experiences self-annihilation, its face is no longer neo-Romantic; it becomes closer to traditional Judaism.

214 Ibid., p. 12.

215 Ibid., p. 17.

216 Ibid., p. 13.

217 Ibid., p. 15.

218 Ibid., p. 22.

219 Ibid., p. 23.

220 Ibid., p. 24.

221 Ibid., p. 30.

222 Ibid., p. 35.

The development of Sadeh's literary writing shows a clear relationship between his attitude to death and his attitude to Judaism: from his youth until the 1980s, his attraction to death was part of his attraction to Christianity and other non-Jewish religious sources. At that period of time he felt distanced from the established Rabbinical Judaism, which, it seemed to him, preferred life over death, even if the life was not beautiful or heroic. Alluding to Ecclesiastes 9:4, he said in a 1974 interview on his attitude to Judaism that,

Judaism itself (...) as it is to this day, did not mean anything vital for me. In other words, the accepted Jewish religion does not seem to me a living thing. (...) The prophets are more living for me than the Rabbis. And in contrast to Ecclesiastes I think that the dead lion is better than the living dog. Then I am passing to Jesus (...) And after him I would mention manifestations, experiments of the real ancient racial spirit, which I feel in my self as well (...) like Sabbetay Tzvi, even Yaakov Frank, whose experiences of outburst and contact with life were very much interrelated with sexuality. Contrasts do not frighten me. Because it is clear to me that contrasts create perfection, for God unites all the contrasts.²²³

The reversal of Sadeh's attitude to death in his last years came together with his growing reservations with regard to Christianity and his closer approach to Jewish sources. In another interview, this one from 2002, one year before his death, Sadeh said:

There are people who are fascinated by illness (...) But I think that it is not a Jewish quality to be fascinated by illness, and I am not fascinated by it (...) I shall not hold this image with the cross even ten minutes more (...) the essence of belief was expressed in the opening of God's ten commandments (...) and in the human answer to that, "Hear Israel our God is one God." It is clear that Christianity is a contrast to that. And I cannot ask something from God, to turn to him with the words of the psalms, if I am in contrast to that (...) Look, it is written in the Psalms that not the dead will praise God (...) because life for itself has something sacred in it.²²⁴

223 Ben-Ezer, *Sadeh*, p. 143.

224 Reuveni, *Sadeh*, pp. 34, 39.

In the same interview Sadeh also said:

One of the splendid things in the Psalms is that power of the war for life. There is never some feeling of: well, OK, it's lost, let us leave. No, David is struggling like a tiger with Goliath. He never gets off from this matter. He bothers God day and night (...) and all this not out of a petty materialistic egotism, God forbid, David was a sacred poet, but out of instinct, which is something religious, this attitude, and I think that this is something religious in the Jewish sense of the word.²²⁵

Amos Oz's Novel *Unto Death*

Amos Oz was born in Jerusalem in 1939, and after his mother's suicide he was sent to be educated in a *kibbutz*. His world view is clearly secular, and he is a conspicuous representative of the rationalistic "practical" Zionist ideology. Considering this background one could expect him to hold an anti-mystical position and to reject the unhealthy, dangerous mystical attraction to self-annihilation and death. In the 1960s, when Oz appeared on the Israeli literary scene, the need for personal and national "normalcy" was a theme which was central for other writers as well, including A.B. Yehoshua and the poet Yehuda Amichai. In his writings, Oz, even more than these two writers, deals incessantly with the conflict between a rational positivist moral stance, on the one hand, and yearnings for self-destruction and death, on the other. Oz vividly described the "negative" obsessions, enabling the reader to identify with them, even when the writer's stance is ironic or critical.

Yearnings for death are present in many of Oz's literary works, from his short stories "The Spirit Level" (1962), "The Trappist Monastery" (1962), and "All the Rivers" (1963), which were included in his *Where the Jackals Howl* (1965), to *A Story of Love and Darkness* (2004), in which he first touched upon his mother's suicide. His novel *My Michael* (1968) opens with the heroine's confession: "I am writing because the people whom I loved are already dead. I

²²⁵ Ibid., p. 65.

am writing because when I was a child I had much power to love and now my power to love is going to die. I do not want to die.”²²⁶ With these words, Amos Oz expressed his opposition to any form of voluntary death. However, he took interest in the attraction to death, maybe because he felt it, unexplained and sharp, in himself. His story “All the Rivers” ends with the words: “The question is wherefrom comes this sudden and sharp wish to die in this very moment.”

In his historical novel *Unto Death* (1971, English 1971) yearnings for suffering and suicidal death are dressed in Christian mystical clothes, which cover a psychological pathology. The hero of this novel is Guillaume de Touron, who commands his army in a crusade on the way to Jerusalem. The story is told from the mediaeval Christian point of view (as the writer understands it) of the hero and of his young relative, the curve-shouldered Claude. From time to time the writer’s point of view appears behind the narrator’s discourse. He states that “Guillaume de Touron set out for the Holy Land, bent on taking part in its deliverance and thereby also on finding peace of mind.”²²⁷ Gradually it becomes clear that there are additional reasons for his travels: the deterioration of his farm, his financial debts and the psychosomatic illnesses of his wives. The need for “peace of mind” becomes clear as we witness the heroes’ behavior: episodes of depression, aggressive actions, and great efforts to recompense evil actions through prayer, silence and fasts. Claude indirectly indicates that yearning for death is a central motivation for Guillaume’s journey: “He visualized his death as a far-off place to which one must go, climbing perhaps or breaking through by force, and he joined together with a blind and stubborn bond the words “to redeem,” “to be redeemed,” “to set fire.”²²⁸ “He firmly believed that in Jerusalem it is possible to die and be born again pure.”²²⁹

The journey to Jerusalem is then for Guillaume a realization of the desire to die and be reborn. The Crusaders’ way does not lead him to Jerusalem, but to self-annihilation. “Shedding their bodies, they made their way, growing ever purer, into the heart of music of the bells and beyond the choirs of angels and yet farther, leaving behind their loathsome flesh and streaming

226 Oz, *My Michael*, p. 5.

227 Oz, *Unto Death*, p. 10.

228 *Ibid.*, pp. 17.

229 *Ibid.*, p. 34.

onward, a jet of whiteness on a white canvas, an abstract purpose, a fleeting vapor, perhaps peace.”²³⁰

While praying, Guillaume feels a yearning for physical self-annihilation: “And in the depths of the silence, the body itself began suddenly to yearn for its own extinction.”²³¹ The tendency toward uncurbed emotional extremity, including mystical tendencies, characterizes Claude as well: “He [Claude] was (...) prone to violently alternating fits of depression and enthusiasm (...) ascetic practices and delights of the flesh (...) His excesses of religious fervor and gloomy melancholy inspired feelings of contempt and loathing in others and consumed the very flesh from his bones, kindling an evil flame in his eye.”²³²

In his way Claude cooperates with his master’s self-destruction: “Meanwhile Claude Crookback went down to a house of ill repute on the edge of the town. He found a woman of easy virtue, dressed her up in his clothes and put his cloak around her, and handed her his dagger. Then he stretched out on the ground for her to trample on him, and begged her to be tortured.”²³³

The writer views Christianity as a religion which sanctifies suffering, and therefore cultivates asceticism and cruelty alike. He finds an affinity whose source is in psychological pathology between exaggerated Christian love, cruelty to oneself and cruelty to the other. Guillaume kills the hidden Jew, Andreas, just because he loves him. Claude explains the cruelty of his master toward his serfs, his land tenants and his wives thus: “For spiritual joy is achieved through suffering.”²³⁴ “Therefore was the son of God meek and mild when He bore our sufferings upon Himself, that we might know and remember that the finest harvest of all is this? When the harsh scythe bites into the tenderest crop in god’s world, and this was a sign for us.”²³⁵ The Bishop of Etiène writes: “And are not these two, humility and suffering (...) outstanding Christian virtues?”²³⁶ Oz picturesquely and symbolically imagined the cross

230 Ibid., p. 81.

231 Ibid., p. 25.

232 Ibid., p. 5.

233 Ibid., p. 17.

234 Ibid., p. 4.

235 Ibid., p. 8.

236 Ibid., p. 20.

in the form of two crossed swords which break through the body and disconnect the human being from earth.²³⁷

Oz considered the Christian attraction to self-destruction as a dangerous psychological pathology. He also rejected the devotion to abstract ideals and any form of asceticism, with which he became acquainted in the *kibbutz* and in Zionist culture as a whole. Against the background of Freudian psychoanalysis, which became very popular in Israel in the 1960s, Oz presented the rejection of the body's needs, and especially the rejection of sexual needs, as a dangerous perversion.

Zelda

In contrast to the previous poets and writers discussed in this chapter, Zelda — a descendent of two famous HABAD dynasties — was an observant woman. Traumas of bereavement hit her a few times during her life: when she was 5 her uncle, the young Rabbi of Niejin, was murdered in a pogrom. When she was 11, the family came to Eretz-Israel, and within months her father and grandfather died, leaving Zelda, the only child, with her mother in an unknown neighborhood. She married at the age of 36, and was widowed 21 years later.

Some of Zelda's poems show her admiration of *kiddush Ha-shem* (Jewish martyrdom). In the prologue of her long poem "The Bad Neighbor," she mentioned this admiration as a childhood memory: "My grandfather prayed: 'Do not bring me to test nor to shame'/ but the dead of *kidush ha-shem*/ sang in the ocean:/ the test is a crown of blood, a crown of kingdom."²³⁸ In her poem "A Shabbath Candle"²³⁹ Zelda expressed her dream to experience the heroic deeds of women martyrs in Hassidic tales. The poem "Every Rose"²⁴⁰ (see ch. 1) ends with the words: "Take a boat/ and cross the sea of fire," conditioning the meeting with the rose, symbol of sacredness, on the readiness to experi-

²³⁷ Ibid., p. 23.

²³⁸ Zelda, *Poems*, p. 39.

²³⁹ Ibid., p. 29.

²⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 59.

ence great suffering. In “With my Father”²⁴¹ the grandfather is pictured as the Biblical Avraham who “bound his own son,” as if the death of her uncle in the pogrom was a voluntary sacrifice by his father.

Some of Zelda’s poems express an attraction to self-annihilation and death, described as happy, beautiful and erotic experiences. In her poem “I Flowered in a Stone House”²⁴² Jerusalem is a mysterious, beautiful world which is also a death trap, devouring the living soul of the poet, who voluntarily drowns in its mysterious chasms. In “The Seamstress,”²⁴³ death is (for a neighboring seamstress) a redeeming wedding. In “I Stood in Jerusalem”²⁴⁴ death erases the reality of all those who are present by a grave, including the very young poet. The feeling of self-annihilation is described here as a happy meeting with death, who tells the terribly lonely girl: “Why were you afraid of me yesterday in the rain? (...) But I am your big silent brother.”

These poems show that Zelda was acquainted with yearnings for death, and treated them, from a religious point of view, as yearnings for the World of Truth. In the poem “Forget Me,”²⁴⁵ which describes the refusal of an old man to die, the poet says that she recognized the seductive voice of the Angel of Death: “I recognized his silent/ terrible sound/ the seducing sound.” The old man’s fear of death seems ridiculous to her, for this world is “limited and ignoble,” while the voice of death is a herald of wonderful, sacred freedom. She speaks about it with excitement: “This freedom is sacred/ and this freedom is glorious/ and this freedom is inconceivable.” Death is here the only absolute value: “the bird of pure truth (...) which suffers no damage/ and it outweighs everything else.” The seductive voice of the Angel of Death arrives from *belimah*, from the highest and innermost point of the divine sacredness.

In the poem “The Silver Candlesticks,”²⁴⁶ Zelda described the lighting of candles on Shabbat eve as an action of physical and erotic unification with her murdered uncle, “whose name is buried in the snow and the tempest erased

241 Ibid., p. 23.

242 Ibid., p. 12.

243 Ibid., p. 20

244 Ibid., p. 63.

245 Ibid., pp. 21-22.

246 Ibid., p. 26.

his memory,/ and only his tear is still warm/ streaming from my eye/ in the banquet, this evening,/ with the flickering of the candles.” Similarly, in the poem “When I Blessed the Candles,”²⁴⁷ the lighting of the candles is performed in an ecstatic state of mind which brings the poet to the verge of death. The intensity of the experience is formulated by two very short sentences which have no predicates, before the last line which expresses the nearness of death: “So much the light around/ and so much the pain -/ in a minute my soul will go out.”

Surprisingly, none of Zelda’s poems is explicitly addressed to God, and none of them describes her intimate contact with Him. However, in the poem “The Bitterness of Death Has Disappeared,”²⁴⁸ the experience of death cancels the separation between the soul and *ayin* (Nothingness), the Kabbalistic and Hassidic source of God. The poem very vividly describes the bodily feeling of death with God’s kiss, with no fear, in a drowning-like devotion to pain and the complete cancellation of the will. Death here is also described as the freezing of a ship in the Northern Sea, a metaphor which Zelda could have found in Konstantin Bal’mont’s long poem “The Dead Ships” (1897), which also influenced Bialik’s long poem “The Dead of the Desert,”²⁴⁹ describing in detail the gradual freezing of a ship and its passengers in the Northern Sea. The passage to death is described as a departure from “the game of fire, light and time” — a combination of words which powerfully and originally expresses the passage to the world beyond ours. It seems that while writing this poem the poet really experienced a simulation of death.

It should be noted, however, that many of Zelda’s poems describe the miracle of overcoming bereavement, depression and inner death as an ecstatic moment. One of her poems also glorifies her grandfather’s inconceivable inner strength, which allowed him to cheer his grandchildren on Shabbat eve soon after the news about the murder of his son came to him, in spite of the family’s bereavement.²⁵⁰ Moreover, in an untitled short poem which was written when she truly was close to her death, Zelda rejected the idea that death

247 Ibid., p. 100.

248 Ibid., p. 65.

249 Nathan, Bialik’s “*The Dead of the Desert*,” pp. 145-160.

250 Ibid., p. 24.

enables one to approach God. In this poem the closeness of death is a fearful, frightening experience. Alluding to “And Moses came close to the mist” (Exodus 20;17), she wrote : “You are wrong/ even on death bed/ the mist does not melt/ even when death came to me/ close to the extent of terror/ I was far (...) / from the riddle.”²⁵¹

For Zelda, as for Pinhas Sadeh, the attraction of death and its characterization as a mystical experience became paler when real death approached.

Rabikovich, Sartel, Hurvitz, Rivka Miriam, and Haviva Pedaia

In Israeli poetry it is not difficult to find examples of attraction to self-annihilation, idealization of death and description of death as a sacred situation. Traumas of bereavement in childhood are sometimes at the biographical background. Dalia Rabikovich (1936-2006) lost her father at the age of 6. In her early poems she described him as a main pillar in a mythological, heavenly temple of death, which governs life. In the poem “The Main Pillar”²⁵² Death is a main pillar on which the whole of existence depends. In it are all the souls, perhaps even those of the living, and they praise God and thank Him, although there is nothing to thank Him for. Rabikovich here alludes to “Not the dead will praise God” (Psalms 115:17) reversing its original meaning: rather than saying that only the living can be in contact with God, she states that the dead never die, for their voices continue to be heard “to the edge of the world.”

Her first collection of poems, “The Love of An Orange” (1957), opens with a poem which describes love as the poet happily being devoured by the lover. An orange is, on the one hand, a regular Israeli fruit, which creates here a realistic effect, but in the context of this poem it is also a literally a golden apple — a chosen, wonderful apple, connected to the paradise myth and to the mystical golden color. When it is being eaten by the lover it “enters his skin/ and even his flesh.”²⁵³ Only when she lets him devour her and cause her pain does she becomes an indivisible part of him. Rabikovich here describes the

251 Ibid., 228

252 Ibid., p. 17.

253 Rabikovich, *Poems*, p. 15

woman's love for the man as resembling the ecstatic unity of a mystic with God, including self-annihilation and happy martyrdom. In the poem "Delight,"²⁵⁴ making love is described by Rabikovich as a cosmic picture in which everyone and everything devours everything else. The light devours the poet's head as if it was an orange.

Yair Hurvitz (1941-1988) lost his father at the age of 8. He attended and graduated from a religious elementary school, but later belonged to a completely secular, bohemian society in Tel-Aviv, together with Yona Wollach. Many of Hurvitz's poems deal with the deaths of his father and of friends and with premonitions of his own death, which finally took him at the age of 47, after several years of heart disease. Some of these poems describe death as an ecstatic unity with a sacred being.

In the poem "Whispering in Me"²⁵⁵ attraction to death is pictured as walking after a dead spirit — perhaps the poet's father — who appears before the poet and holds him. The dead man is surrounded by a "cracked halo"; he is sacred, but also pathetic. "He was once Kingdom" — the name of this Kabbalistic *sephira* is an additional hint that from the child's point of view he always belonged to the heavenly world. The divine light of the suffering father breaks the child's heart: "Light went broken inside me./ I know these hard days." The poet says at the end that even if he behaves as usual externally, speaking and laughing, in his soul the attraction to death continues to act "like *ksamim* (...) *kashim* (hard magic)," playing with the similarity of sounds with *samim kashim* (hard drugs), indirectly saying that it is a very powerful feeling from which it is very difficult for him to rehabilitate himself.

Yearnings for death also appear in the opening and ending poems of Hurvitz's cycle *In a City with No Heavens* (1968). In the opening poem, "On Your Heart, Open,"²⁵⁶ the poet wrote: "and I on the mountains a bird kissing my last part (...) in the earth dressed in azure I shall kiss." Here the poet lives in a constant state of elevation, of death with a divine kiss, while his bird-like soul is kissing his death, thus wrapping the earth with a heavenly azure. This

254 Ibid., p. 47.

255 Hurvitz, *The Fate of the Garden*, p. 138.

256 Ibid., p. 75.

poem opens with a description of the urban reality, which is devoid of heaven and possesses a life that is external and empty “like the dress of the dead man.” His whole life, all his delights and possessions, seem to the poet like water in a basket. The kiss to “the last part” of life is painful, but it elevates him and contributes an inner momentum which enables him to depart from the regular earthly human sphere to a place beyond it, like a fish jumping from the water into the air, or like a bird which instead of flying walks on the water like on the steps of a palace: “I shall wound the pain of the painful water/ like a sawing fish,/ I shall ascend the water’s steps/ Like a bird,” the poet promises.

In the concluding poem of the same book, “But My Love,”²⁵⁷ death is a consolation of love’s pains. Love was a paradise, but now it has become clear that it is nothing but a shadow, while the approaching death will enable the poet to blossom: “Soon I and my death will be opened like a flower.” Here, as in Sadeh’s poems, death is a marriage, and the poet’s soul is the bride: “Bless my soul bless a bird (...)/ who nestles in the clouds.” It is the reflections about death which enable the poet to revive life and to perceive the sweetness of existence on earth again: “A sun leans on fresh water/ I shall burn shoots/ in the *khashra* (nimbus).// Its dress is a mist./ My sweetness is eager on pieces of leaves.” The word *khashra* appears only once in the Bible (Shmuel II 22:10), in the context of the darkness which surrounds God’s dwelling. Hurvitz is here describing how in a heavenly world he is lighting a fire which feeds on the remnants of the earthly world’s vitality. Thus out of devotion to death the poet achieves a feeling of inner peace, growth and abundant sweetness.

In other poems death is for Hurvitz a wondrous redemption from a defective and repulsive reality. The poem “Not Soft in My Heart”²⁵⁸ describes the poet’s loneliness and feelings of guilt about cooperating with a world of corruption. Reflections on his death, which will return him to an eternal, pure, gentle and beautiful world, help him to recover: “Convicted to death I spit in their tongue. Fire.// My peace always/ will recover past-present-future./ From dust body/ will return a pure world,/ for me a dowry/flowers’ muslin for hov-

257 Ibid., p. 84.

258 Ibid., p. 141.

ering birds.” The word “dowry” hints that pure and beautiful death is like a marriage, in which the poet plays the feminine role.

In the poem “The Mercy of Light after Death”²⁵⁹ the poet wakes up from his beloved dream, in which he is an only child, to suffer from joyfully aggressive, hostile and malicious treatment, even at the hands of his close friends; he finds himself living a dog’s life. He tells himself that only death will turn the dog into a human being: “remember the dog who in his death became a man.” These thoughts awaken a powerful inner movement in him, “a movement of the *mithapekhet* wheel” (word play on the expression *kherv mithapekhet*, the sword of the angel who keeps the gates of paradise closed), which leads him “far away from the square of sauna merchandise” to a wonderful place of light and flowers. Towards the end of the poem he asks himself, “shall I sink in the masque which makes the dog run,/ shall I widen the light or obey the shadow?” In other words, should he go on with this dog’s life or follow the beautiful death? The enigmatic answer is: “My son, my only son which I dreamt,/ You see me right like the non-speaking moon/ makes a stone into tombstone, surrounds it/ by flowers desirous of love and the sadness is melting into vapor/ it will silently be silent like rotting water until flowers will be destroyed on me flowers from the water of a mire/ in the breath of death.” The poet hears the voice of death speaking to him as a father speaks to his beloved only child. Death calls him to look at him with *menukha nekhona* (the right peace of mind, an expression from the requiem prayer *El malei rakhamim*), to surround himself with tombstones like the ones the moon sees, to surround the tomb with flowers and love until the sadness melts and he himself rots and dies. The enigmatic style expresses the subconscious stream of self-caress and of delightful devotion to a sort of existential slumber. This voice, the voice of death, fills the poet with a refined delight.

Hurvitz’s poem, “A Legend Hits the Shutters, Death,”²⁶⁰ opens with the poet’s yearning for death while he is lonely returning to his home. The feeling attacks him like a beast, seizes him like a fire and reveals itself as a perfect, erotic, pure delight. It wraps him like a garment of the chosen, beloved son. He feels that the idea of death is for him “an opening of miracles,” his only hope for rescue from his

259 Ibid., pp. 156-157.

260 Ibid., pp. 193-194.

present anxiety. This anxiety stems from a consciousness that life is valueless, poor, monotonous and mechanistic. The poem ends with the poet awaiting the miracle of death as one waits to find a treasure or a woman waits to give birth. Death is for him *khemda tehora* (pure delight) — this expression repeats twice in the poem — a combination of sensual, erotic and spiritual happiness. It is even described as *glilei* (here: scrolls) of *khemda tehora* (pure delight), indicating that the delight is going to open like a Torah scroll. Death here is like a miracle of belated birth, or the birth of the Phoenix from dust which was lying forgotten in a jar. The thought itself is the poet's miraculous exit from his unreal life.

The poem "Until I Come"²⁶¹ opens with a description of the poet standing in "the square of sicknesses" (probably the Diezengoff square in Tel-Aviv), a center of darkness, drugs and blood. The poet turns his back to it, "I went no more in these streets," and goes toward a feminine being, which "is sitting on mountains, her wing is light like the light of flowers/ and I my face to hers." The poet asks her to give him a death like that of Yair Ben-Elazar, the leader of the group which committed collective suicide in Masada. Such a death will purify him and turn his pain into a source of light: "I was asking there for the death of Yair Ben-Elazar and soil was gathering under me and going to my clothes,/ gathering and coming impure are bathing/ showing me the stone of sickness its heart being opened to suns."

In a few poems the contrast between earthly life, which the poet loathes, and the world of death, which he prefers, is pictured as a contrast between the world of sun and the world of moon. For example, the second poem of the cycle "6 Variations in an Ephemeral Light" opens with the words "And the sun is so here until/ I saw flowers withering on it (...) to see sights of external light." The poet realizes that the world of sun is a place of withering flowers and of surrogates (*novelette*, both fading and surrogate, see Bereishit Raba 43). Then he sees the "empty and cold noon" in which it is possible to rest, and then the poem describes a gradual dying while the poet is resting in the emptiness of the moon, repeating the expression *lanuakh al mishkavo* from the *El malei rakhamin* prayer, omitting syllables, for he is gradually losing his ability to utter words.

261 Ibid., p. 113.

In the poem “As He was Walking, the Shadow” the shadow is death. The poem opens with the words “As he was walking, the shadow *arav* to him.” Using the homonymic *arav* (was pleasant, but can be understood orally as ambushed) the poet turns the expectation of death as danger into a source of pleasure. Joyfully the poet imagines his death, including the rite of purifying his body. At the same time he hears a song of praise to death and to the afterlife, which is won by writing poems. Dying is compared here to eating sweet dates as well as to a “fertilizing coupling” and to a delightful kiss of the soul who got back her menstruation. The coupling takes place in the heart of a flower whose petals have beautiful names. Out of the yearning and the deep depression the soul flies up to death, which is a gentle kiss. Dying is also described as the trembling of wings before the soul glides in the air and joins the heavenly wings. These wings are also a rain which fertilizes the deceased and produces crops out of it. The poem ends by saying that the deceased body’s holes, which are being cleaned after his death, will turn into flutes praising the bitter-fragrant gardens of paradise. The poet imagines the feeling of choking while he is dying together with the delight which he is expecting. His belief that heaven will “stand” for him (help him), defend and support him (alluding to *ve-hi she-amda* in the Passover Haggada) redeems him from the flight from death. The poem ends with the word “heaven,” which signifies the passage to another world, in which there is no more need for words.

Death in Hurvitz’s poetry is the way to a beauty, spirituality and sacredness which cannot to be found in the humiliating, painful, oppressing world. Hurvitz viewed death as aesthetic, refined, delightful and sensual. In contrast to Sadeh, Hurvitz did not connect death with masculine sexuality; he imagined it as a trans-gender erotic experience, which enables the poet to play the feminine role and to feel like a beloved, protected only child. The poet’s yearnings for death are an indivisible part of his yearnings for spirituality, beauty and sacredness. He does not see any chance to find those qualities in life itself.

Moshe Sartel's poem "One Poem of Mourners"²⁶² describes in detail the death of the biblical Moses — or perhaps the poet's own death — through the kiss of God. Moshe Sartel was born in 1942 in Istanbul, and came to Israel in 1949. He holds a B.A. in Jewish Philosophy and Kabbalah, and writes in an esoteric style, difficult to understand. The poem opens with the words "He kissed Moses at the end of his life the kiss of a lion and the kiss of a bear, He kissed Moses on the top of a mountain He kissed Moses." The style is archaic and the rhetoric is ecstatic. Throughout the poem the words "He kissed Moses" obstinately repeat themselves, intensifying the impression of wonder and mystery. The kiss of God to Moses is here presented as a contrast to Moses' many deficiencies, thus raising questions about the hero's worthiness for such a kiss: "[Moses was] weak in his right hand his tongue tied/ and heavy in his two hands still He kissed Moses on both cheeks (...) Why did He kiss Moses why did he kiss Moses on both cheeks and on his lips and on his brow? (...) His body is covered with leprosy like a piece of snow, his wife is negro and black like coal/ his sons are not circumcised and his birth was in water also in this He kissed Moses with a kiss." It seems that Moses' deficiencies are manifestations of God's kiss.

The poet then interprets the kiss of God not as an instantaneous event which took place at Moses' death, but as a permanent situation of the elevated personality. Moses was always "on the top of a mountain," close to God. Moses felt that he was kissed even when he was devoured by beasts: "Out of the forest went out bears to kiss Moses. Fierce tigers were seeking for the prey of Moses' kiss." Moses himself is characterized as a man-beast: "his eyes see far and his brow wrinkled like an animal's brow." His animal-like wildness is also a sign of his closeness to God. The kiss is a cosmic event in which the whole being participates, obsessed with erotic joy. Alluding to the Passover *Hagada*, the poet wrote: "The mountains dance and the earth trembles to kiss Moses." The poem ends with the line "Let His name be blessed, and let Him kiss me too from the kisses of his mouth." In this last line, which alludes to the Song of Songs, the poet reveals his wish to experience a death like Moses', with God's kiss.

262 Sartel, *On The Way to Beit-El*, p. 26.

In an interview which was taken in 1994 Sartel said about this poem: “I have fire in my thought. Fire in my bones (...) the fire is in the poetry and I am the sacrifice.”²⁶³ This seems like an echo of Bialik’s “My Light Was Not Unearned.” In each poem, the poet’s life is viewed as a constant burning of a voluntary sacrifice, with the difference that Bialik emphasized the social and national results of his sacrifice, while Sartel implied, even in his style, that in devoting himself to his poetic mission he did not have such an aim.

Interestingly enough, the fascination with mystical self-annihilation and death, which was quite popular in Hebrew poetry written by men during the first half of the 20th century, was not shared by women poets at that time. In contrast to Bialik, Ben-Yitzhak, Uri Zvi Greenberg, Shlonsky and Alterman, the poetry of women — Rachel, Esther Raab, Lea Goldberg, Yocheved Bat-Miriam and others — during this period shows no sign of attraction to such experiences, or to mysticism in general. However, as we saw above in the discussion of Dalia Rabikovich, the theme does appear in Israeli women’s poetry written during the second half of the 20th century. The poetry of Rivka Miriam and of Haviva Pedaia can serve as examples.

Rivka Miriam was born in 1952 to parents who had survived the *Shoah*. Her father, Leib Rochman, was a Yiddish writer who wrote two novels on the *Shoah*. In her early poetry, Rivka Miriam identified herself with her relatives who were murdered in the *Shoah* and experienced their deaths. In later poems, a meeting with God is sometimes a meeting with Nothingness and death. The penetration of death into her soul then awakens and revives her.

In the poem “And a Man was Struggling with Me”²⁶⁴ she wrote: “And a man was struggling with me/ and the image of his mother is like the image of mine/ there is nothing after him and before him there is none/ to kill me when from the soil he raises me/ when I name his I name mine.” The poet transforms Jacob’s struggle with the Angel (Genesis 32:25) into a personal narrative of the poet’s struggle with herself. The divine power of the angel, who provocatively resembles the poet herself and even (as it becomes clear in

263 Sartel, “Interview,” p. 30.

264 Rivka Miriam, *And the Jew is Resting*, p. 75.

the last line) is equal to her, simultaneously kills and revives her. Existence is here understood as an incessant struggle with the inner human-divine power of death. Life is not possible without death. In contrast to other poets' passive delight in death, Rivka Miriam did not devote herself to self-sacrifice, but she did accept the need to struggle against the attraction to death, and even to touch it as a condition of life.

In another poem she wrote: "In our hands we shall take the elementary point/ fierce as death is the elementary point (...) we shall unbutton the dresses of the elementary point/ until it will swell beyond all its scopes/ when it will get pregnant with our image."²⁶⁵ The "elementary point" here is the absolute sacredness, the dimension which is beyond human thought, which Bialik referred to in his essay "Covering and Uncovering Language" (see above). The poet describes here a feeling of divine power which enables a human being not only to touch sacredness, but even to influence it, even to create it in his (human) image. The Biblical story of creation, in which God created man in His image, is here turned upside down. Later in the poem it becomes clear that the mysterious contact with sacredness demands readiness to feel pain or even to die, for that "point," like love in *The Song of Songs*, is "fierce like death." The contact with death is a creative divine situation.

In her short poem "The Temple is Full,"²⁶⁶ the connection between sacredness and death is very clear: "The Temple is Full of my hems/ Whoever looks at my hems dies/ for the temple dies in its desire/ and its death outbursts and breaks through my hems." Alluding to Isaiah 6:1, the poet compares herself to God, whose hems are hardly visible. These hems — the manifestation of God — act upon human beings in the same way as God does in Exodus 33:20: "For no man will see me and remains alive." They make him die. The poet feels that God is death, and the divine world is flowing into her like death. Death is here the divine abundance which bursts out and flows into whoever gets in contact with it. This death results from the power of desires: total devotion to desires is sacred, but it is also death. The poet recognizes in herself parts, indeed "peripheral" parts, which have become part of God, and hence have become a source of

²⁶⁵ "The Elementary Point," *Ibid.*, p. 30.

²⁶⁶ *Idem.*, *Nearby Was the East*, p. 35.

death, both for herself and for whoever surrounds her. In the word *shulai* (my hems, my peripheries) there is a disillusioned consciousness of the fact that this destructive unity has never occupied her total self, only her “peripheries,” so she can shake herself from it when she returns to her human dimensions.

In the poems of Haviva Pedaia (born in Jerusalem in 1965, a descendent of the Kabbalist Rabbi Yehuda Patia) suffering and death are inevitable on the way to sacredness. In her poem “Let Human Being,”²⁶⁷ the poet turns with prayer to God and asks Him: “Let human being/ pass the blood/ let him discover what is un/tearable [sic] from the masque of skin.” This means that in order to reach the discovery of heavenly secrets a person should get rid of his corporeality through an experience of acute pain. Indeed, later in the poem the poet describes her life as the continuing slaughter of a sacrifice: “And nothing remained of me (...) from period to period/ it becomes more bitter/ the slaughter and the dying (...) then they sacrificed me in the middle of blooming/ then they slaughtered me at the end of fall/ the blood of sunset is the earth that you see now.” Toward the end of the poem she wrote “I am not worthy the blood has not made me sacred the tears have not made me sacred/ suffering has not made me sacred/ but I believe that one can be a sacred animal/ this is the meaning of the voice of bloods crying from the bottom of the body.” It seems that without the pain cry of the blood the presence of sacredness is dubious. In another poem mystical experience is “clear death” and *avadon* (destruction, hell), but withdrawal from it, back to earthly life, “seems like a burial”: “Withdrawing from diving/ from its clear death/ whatever does not elevate itself with a galloping shriek/ what is not the essence of galloping/ seems like a burial.”²⁶⁸ For Pedaia, suffering unto death is an integral part of the mystical experience.

Summary

Many literary works which were written in Hebrew since the 1890s describe real or imagined death as a delightful experience of spiritual happiness and beauty. This does not mean, however, that all

²⁶⁷ Pedaia, *From a Blocked Box*, pp. 9-10.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

Hebrew and Israeli poets who wrote mystical poetry were attracted to death: Amir Gilboa is a clear argument against such an assumption.

In these poems the experience of mystical self-annihilation or death was often formulated in Jewish traditional terms, such as peeping into *blima*, *hit'ainut*, *hitbatlut*, *bitul ha-yesh*, *dveikut* and by metaphors of love, kissing, coupling, self-burning, drowning, being swallowed, entering temples through gates, unifying souls, sleeping, and cancelling colors unto white. The situation is sometimes that of a religious Jewish ritual. For example, in the stories of Berdychesky, Peretz, Feierberg and Agnon and in Bialik's poems, mystical death takes place during prayer or study of the Torah. Ben-Yitzhak connected it with the word "One" from the *Shema Israel* prayer. Such formulae witness the continuity between these texts and traditional Jewish mystical texts which view "death with God's kiss" as a mystical goal.

At the same time, mystical death in modern Hebrew literature differs from mystical death in traditional Jewish mysticism in a multitude of other respects. The most conspicuous is the fact that the goal of this death or annihilation is neither Jewish martyrdom nor mystical *dveikut* with God; it is not necessarily religious in the regular sense of the word, and not even necessarily Jewish. Its goal can be purification, escape from earthly corruption, unity with an elevated spiritual being, revival of inner creative powers, unification with a dead beloved, or devotion to a sacred mission. Many writers and poets describe mystical death not during religious rituals but in other situations which are not necessarily connected with religion, such as walking in endless snow (Berdychesky) or participating in a Crusade (Oz). The metaphors used to describe this death are sometimes exceedingly far from Jewish tradition: death by choking in a mother's lap, or the death of an insect after his coupling (Bialik), the murder of a twin brother, self-sacrifice for a cruel woman (Alterman), meeting with a brother or being a ship stuck in a frozen sea (Zelda). Modern Hebrew literature also includes detailed descriptions of the experience of self-annihilation and dying and detailed descriptions of the corrupted, insufferable reality (or the personal sufferings of the poet) which cause the poet to wish to escape it.

Death as a mystical experience in modern Hebrew literature has non-Jewish sources as well: Peretz combined neo-Romantic motifs with his Hassidic

tales attributing to mystical death pure beauty and artistic creativity. Berdychovsky combined Schopenhauerian ideas to his descriptions of Hassidic *bitul ha-gashmiut*. Feierberg, in describing the death wishes of a young child, was influenced by Russian Symbolist prose. Agnon described Jewish mystical death as a Romantic *Liebestod*. Bialik combined the myth of Prometheus with the Talmudic legend about the four who entered the Garden. Alterman in his “The Joy of the Poor” combined Nietzschean ideas with Jewish sources to justify the necessity of death for the sake of revival. Oz described the attraction to mystical death from a psychoanalytic point of view. Sadeh was inspired by the New Testament and by Nietzsche as well as by Neo-Romantic literature. Zelda combined Hassidic and Russian Symbolist motifs.

The attraction to mystical death was differently treated by various writers. For example, Peretz and Oz treated it as a pathological dangerous tendency, while Berdychovsky, Feierberg, Agnon and Alterman viewed it as a paradoxical expression of emotional vitality. Bialik appreciated the self-sacrifice of the poet for his mission, the revival of the national spirit, but also described the lover’s dangerous yearnings for death. In Israeli poetry, Pinhas Sadeh and Yair Hurvitz describe a happy devotion to death as a way for the chosen few to be redeemed from insufferable reality. In the poetry of Rabikovich and Sadeh, mystical death is an erotic experience. Bialik, Sartel and Pedaia view the creative act as a sort of devotion to mystical death. Rivka Miriam and Pedaia view struggle with the experience of death as a condition to contact with sacredness.

Modern Hebrew literature was born from the ideological soil of national revival together with socialist and Vitalist ideas. The creation of healthy Jewish life in Eretz-Israel was its main aim. In this context, death as a mystical goal was a strange thought. Nonetheless, together with other mystical ideas, it appears again and again in Hebrew prose and poetry.

How can mystical yearnings for death be connected to the secular belief in the superior importance of Jewish revival? This problem has found various solutions in Hebrew literature. One of them is the poetic description of the destructive mystical experience of a literary character, and at the same time the writer’s criticism of it. The result is an ambivalent attitude. This is what Peretz and Oz — writers who in other respects are so different from each other — did in their prose writings. A second solution, which is more acceptable

from a Zionist point of view, is the view of mystical death as an active devotion to a sacred goal which mobilizes inner powers of vitality, powers which until then were dying or lost. The devotion to death in this context is part of a struggle against inner death and social-cultural Jewish or Israeli decadence. The terrestrial and physical reality seems sick, while mystical self-annihilation is an act of self-revival. This stance can be found in the poetry of Ben-Yitzhak, Alterman and Rivka Miriam. A third way is using an aesthetic and erotic idealization of death to enable disconnection from the present corrupted reality. This is characteristic of Sadeh's prose and poetry alike. A fourth is a complete withdrawal from the will of life in situations of personal anxiety and suffering. This path was taken by Zelda, Sartel, Hurvitz and Pedaia. It should be noted that the two last solutions have nothing to do with Zionism, concerning only the individual world of the poet.

It is not by chance that only in the work of one writer — Pinhas Sadeh — is the attraction to death a central theme. Sadeh's obsessive interest in death goes hand in hand with his attraction to Christianity and with his negation of the established Israeli-Zionist reality. In his later years, this attitude was exchanged for a love for Judaism and a gratefulness for life.

CHAPTER FIVE

Friendship as a Mystical Goal

A Neglected Aspect of Mysticism

Definitions and descriptions of mystical experiences usually emphasize its personal character.¹ Mystics are supposed to keep out of social, national and political activities, and to live in seclusion.² The yearning for mystical unity is often seen as a wish for freedom from social and interpersonal relationships. The idea of voluntary seclusion as a condition for mystical experience seems to be based on the theological assumption that disconnection from society and terrestrial life is needed in order to make contact with the divine sacredness. Richard Jones wrote: “In all classical mystical traditions we find an outstanding absence of social activity (...) the mystic is interested in his own personal redemption.”³ The mystical experience in its climax seems to reject, at least temporarily, normal frames of life. It seems to demand a certain period of disconnection from social life and interpersonal relationships. The esoteric, non-communicative, dreamlike style of many mystical texts can be a basis for the argument that the mystical experience is subjective to such an extent that it cannot be transmitted at all.⁴ This concept of mysticism as an anti-social activity explains many mystics’ tendencies to live in monasteries or as lonely wanderers, and sometimes even to disregard conventional moral principles.

Buber wrote: “In Hassidism you cannot be in contact with God without being in essential contact with people.”⁵ Buber regarded intimate interpersonal contact as a clearly Jewish and general mystical activity. Gershom Scholem, in

1 See, for example: James, *The Religious Experience*, pp.28-29; Leuba, *The Psychology*, pp. 1-7; Underhill, *Mysticism*, pp. 76-77; McGinn, *Foundations* vol. 1 pp. xix-xx.

2 Weiss, “Contemplation as Solitude”; Idel, “Seclusion.”

3 Jones, *Mysticism Examined*, p. 195.

4 Dan, *Sacredness*, pp. 31-58.

5 Buber, *In the Orchard of Hassidism*, p. 111.

contrast, regarded Hassidism as a movement which for the sake of populism turned Kabbalah to social, psychological and ethical tracts and thus reduced its “pure” mystical elements.⁶ He considered Hassidism less mystical than Kabbalah because of its “socialized mysticism.” Rabbi Kook’s “personal” way of writing was mentioned by Yoni Garb as an argument which proves that Kook’s teachings were “real mysticism,” despite the mystical value attributed by him to interpersonal, social and political activities.⁷

Not enough attention was paid to social and interpersonal activities in mystical life and texts.⁸ The idea that mystical activity is a means of improving Man and the world, not only the mystic himself, is common to many mystical teachings. Many mystics cultivated life in a group. Mystical life often includes teacher-pupil relationships, modesty, altruism, mercy, love and sex. Study, prayer, singing, playing, dancing, eating — these activities can be performed as ritual group activities. In both Christianity and Judaism, there are religious symbols which emphasize the spiritual togetherness of the group. Such is the Christian Church and Jesus’ body itself, in which Christian believers feel themselves united, and also the Jewish *Knesset Israel* and the *Shekhina*, expressing the divine togetherness of the Jewish people. The goal of mystical activity in Judaism is not only unity with God, but also the improvement of the Jewish situation and of the whole world.

This chapter deals with Jewish texts which describe ecstatic group unity or deep friendship as *Unio Mystica* (erotic and sexual relationships will be discussed in chapter 6). In these texts, intimate relationships between people are viewed as a redemptive ecstatic activity which erases individuality and can influence the divine spheres and the whole Being. In contrast to the usual emphasis on a mystical “vertical” relationship between man and God, these texts emphasize the idealized unity of the mystic with another person or with the group as a spiritual, sacred “horizontal” unity. Such a concept of the mystical experience is not necessarily a result of the writer’s way of life. A mystic can live in a group and still believe that contact with God should be achieved in seclusion, while a mystic who lives alone can believe that one reaches God only in a group.

6 On this polemics and its results see Haran, *Rabbi Avraham of Kalisk*, pp. 520-521.

7 Garb, “Kook.”

8 Wexler deals with social phenomena, but not with texts. See Wexler, *The Mystical Society*.

Dveikut Haverim in Jewish Tradition

Group activity was a constant part of Jewish mystical tradition, which was transmitted through the ages from one mystical circle to another.⁹ We find it in the Hellenistic period among the *Serakh ha-Yakhad* group (the Dead Sea sect) and in the *Heikhalot* literature of the *Yordei ha-merkava*. In the Middle Ages, mystical group activity was continued in Kabbalistic circles among the students mentioned in the Zohar, and later, after the 1492 Expulsion from Spain, in Tsfat, among the Lurianic group and in the groups which were founded by Rabbi Hayim Vital, Eleazar Azikri and the Kordovero group, and then among the Sabbateans and the Frankists. The group tradition was particularly central in early Hassidism.¹⁰ The emphasize on seclusion as a suitable mystical situation penetrated Jewish mysticism probably under Sufi influence.¹¹ In later Hassidism, seclusion was recommended only for the *tsadik*, while simple people had to achieve unity through intimate contact with him as a mediator, or through social activities.¹²

The religious value of the group in Jewish mysticism grows from the basic national character of Jewish spirituality. Yehuda Liebes wrote: "In the Jewish context, religious spirituality is always tied together with nationality."¹³ The individual Jewish mystic views himself as part of the nation; his unity with God does not liberate him from his attachment to the Jewish community and history. He is also not liberated from his religious-social duties. Such a concept of national identity does not exclude the attachment of the individual mystic to his specific group or to humanity as a whole, but its basis is a tradition

9 Weiss, "The Hassidic Group," pp. 28-29; Liebes, "The Messiah of the Zohar," pp. 93-94.

10 On the mystical groups of *Yordei ha-merkava* see Elior, *Temple and Chariot*, p. 212-240; On the Zohar's group see Liebes, "How was the Zohar Composed?"; idem, "the Messiah of the Zohar." On the Zafad Kabbalists see Scholem, "The Bill"; Benayahu, "The Hassidic Groups." On group in early Hassidism see Scholem, "The two First Testimonies"; Weiss, "The Beginning of Hassidism"; idem, "A Circle of Pneumatics."

11 Idel, "Seclusion."

12 Weiss, "Contemplation as Solitude," p. 132; Haran, *Rabbi Avraham of Kalisk*, p. 533.

13 Liebes, "Reflections," pp. 8-9.

according to which unity with God is to be achieved through spiritual unity with other Jewish people.

Jewish religious rituals, such as prayer in a *minyan* (a quorum of at least ten people), emphasize the importance of the community. The symbolic image of the ten *sephirot* can be understood as a reflection of the *minyan*, attributing a divine sacredness to it.¹⁴ Such a view is implied in a story told in the Zohar's *Idra Raba* about a gathering of Rabbi Shimon Bar-Yohai and a group of students.

Rabbi Shimon [Bar-Yokhai] got up and prayed his own prayer. Then he sat among them and said: everyone will put his hand in my lap. And they put their hands and he took them (...) And he called his son, Rabbi Elazar, and he seated him before himself, and Rabbi Abba on the other side, and he said: We are the public Whole. The pillars have been prepared. They were silent. They heard a voice and their knee-joints trembled. What is the voice? It's the voice of the divine assembly (*kneissia* [sic]) getting together. Rabbi Shimon rejoiced and said: 'God I heard about you and became frightened' (Habakuk 3:2)--there it was suitable to be frightened, in our case the thing depends on love, for it is written 'And you shall love your God' (Deutr 6:5), and 'because of God's love to you' (Deutr. 7:8) and 'I shall love you' (Malachi 1:2).¹⁵

This moment of collective intimacy is a moment of *dveikut*. Love between the members of the group is here viewed as a mystical activity which is able to influence the upper worlds and the coming of the Messiah.¹⁶ Moreover, the story constructs a parallelism and a unity between a group of friends who are united in love and the divine beings in Heaven.

The term "*ahavat haverim*" (friends' love) received its mystical meaning from Tsfat Kabbalists. In Lurianic Kabbalah, prayer is an activity by which an individual joins the other members of a group, who become members of one and the same body. It is part of the process which leads toward unity with God.¹⁷

14 Liebes, "How Was the Zohar Composed?," pp. 32-33.

15 *Zohar* part 3 pp. 127b- 128a. See Tishbi, *Zohar*, vol. 1 pp. 28-29. For interpretation of this text see Liebes, "The Messiah of the Zohar," pp. 128-134.

16 Liebes, "How was the Zohar Composed?," pp. 159, 162-163.

17 Liebes, *The Messiah of the Zohar*, pp. 162-163.

The three songs for Sabbath eve which Rabbi Luria composed all describe the meeting of the Jew with God as a group event.¹⁸

This idea is developed further in Hassidic thought.¹⁹ The Hassidic saying “*Kudsha brich hu, oraita ve-Israel kula had hu*” (God, the Torah and Israel are all One), was interpreted by the Magid Dov Ber of Mezyrich (1704-1772) as saying that the friendly intimate contact of one Jew with another is parallel to the upper unity of the *sephirot*.²⁰ A radical example of this Hassidic view is the teaching of Rabbi Avraham of Kalisk, a student of the Magid, who died in Tiberias in 1810. He taught that the achievement of intimate relationships among the members of the group (not only with the *tsadik!*) was a necessary condition to unity with God. He considered it an activity which cannot be separated from the *Unio Mystica* itself.²¹ He wrote that “Friends’ Love,” no less than prayer or “study with intention,” was a situation of unity with God,²² “And when they will all be like one person God will dwell in them.”²³ He regarded even an intimate contact with a friend who has reached contact with God as an indirect way to God, and saw this possibility as demanding spiritual efforts from both friends. In Rabbi Avraham of Kalisk’s circle, “Friends’ Love” took the place of *dveikut*, contact with God.

During the 20th century, Rabbi Kook continued to develop the idea that unity between Jews was a mystical imperative. He emphasized the transcendental meaning of the term *knesset Israel* (the name of the Jewish people’s spirit in the Mishna and Talmud and later the name of the Israeli parliament) by identifying it with *sephirat Malkhut*. Rabbi Kook considered even his writing to be an activity of mystical unity with his readers. He wrote: “And I need to join with your souls, with all of you (...) Every one of you (...) is a great and important sparkle of the torch of Eternal Light.”²⁴

18 Liebes, “Shabbat Songs of Ha-ARI”

19 Peikazh, *Between Ideology and Reality*, pp. 179-198.

20 Dov Ber of Mezerich, *Magid Dvarav le-Yaakov*, note 132, pp. 227-231.

21 Weiss, “Kalisker’s Concept of communion”; Gries, “Rabbi Avraham of Kalisk,” pp. 117-146; Haran, *Rabbi Avraham of Kalisk*.

22 Haran, *ibid.*, p. 524.

23 Cited by Haran, *ibid.*

24 Kook, *The Lights of Torah*, p. 54.

An interesting example of Jewish group mystical activity is the Kabbalistic and Hassidic tradition of confession in a group. This ritual was common among the Tsfat Kabbalists; it was also recommended by Rabbi Menahem-Mendel of Vitebsk as a means to achieve *dibuk haverim* (unity of friends). It was practiced in the non-Hassidic (but respected by HABAD) “committees” of the *Mussar* movement, which was founded by Rabbi Israel Salanter in mid-19th century in Vilnius and spread over Eastern Europe.²⁵ It is interesting to compare this tradition with the Christian confession, which is done in secret, for the ears of the priest only.

Together-ness in East European Neo-mysticism

The revival of interest in mysticism in late 19th and early 20th century European culture gave birth to the movements of Symbolism and neo-Romanticism in literature, drama and art. These modern versions of mysticism cultivated individualism and subjectivism, in the tradition of Romanticism. They laid a special emphasis on art as a mystical experience and viewed the artist as a sacred being. Egoism was one of the main components of the fin-de-siècle “decadent” experience in Western-European literatures. In contrast, Russian modern mysticism laid great stress on together-ness as a redemptive activity, criticizing egoism and individualism. The founders of this trend, Alexei Khomiakov (1804-1860), Nikolay Fiodorov (1829-1903), and Vladimir Soloviev (1853-1900), viewed overcoming egoism as a uniquely Russian path to personal, national and universal redemption.²⁶ In literature, Fiodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881) expressed the same ideas. Dostoevsky’s sharp criticism of the psychological premises of “rational” or “scientific” egoism clearly resounds through *Crime and Punishment* (1866) and is the thematic center of his novel *Devils* (1871-1872). The need to overcome egoism is a central theme in Vladimir Soloviev’s *Lectures on Godmanhood* (1878). According to Soloviev, man can achieve self-fulfillment only when he mingles with the

25 Weiss, “The Group of Hassidim,” p. 165; Bnayahu, “The Hassidic Groups”; Katz, *The Mussar Movement*, vol 4 pp. 240-241; Rapaport-Albert, “Confession,” pp. 94-95.

26 Kravchenko, *Mysticism in Russian Philosophy*, pp. 228-229; Gorbunov, *Sobornost’*.

people and becomes part of a universal totality. *Sobornost'* is the Russian term for the ideal of sacred togetherness. This word is an abstract noun, derived from the word *sobor*, which means both an assembly and a cathedral or church. In Old Slavonic, "*sobornaia*" is the translation of the Greek "Catholikos," which means the unity of the believers in Jesus' body. Khomiakov used *Sobornost'* to signify the uniqueness of Russian religious life, where unity protects the freedom of the individual, for it is a unity out of love and freedom.²⁷ Khomiakov wrote: "One does not find in the Church anything which is alien to himself. One finds himself in it, not in sterile spiritual loneliness, but in sincere unity with his brother, the Savior."²⁸ For Khomiakov this was the difference between Russian Christianity and Protestant individualism or Catholic despotism. Khomiakov stressed that every individual is an organic part of the Church. He set to naught the Church hierarchy, thus encouraging the populist mystical sects in Russia. Khomiakov viewed the *mir*, the Russian traditional community, as an incorporation of the idea of *Sobornost'*, for it erased the boundaries between individual freedom and integration with the community.

Following Khomiakov, Ivan Kireevsky (1806-1856), Konstantin Aksakov (1817-1860) and other Slavophil thinkers discussed the idea of *Sobornost'* and developed the idea of the mystical value of Russian community life. Nikolay Fiodorov, whose writings were published and circulated only at the beginning of the 20th century, created the philosophy of *kosmizm* or "The Philosophy of the Universal Affair," as it was called by his followers. Fiodorov wrote that the root of evil in the world is *nerodstvennost'* (lack of family relationships), not only between children and parents, but also among adults and between man and nature. He believed that the reconstruction of *rodstvo* (family togetherness) within Russian Christianity was the way to personal, national and cosmic redemption. Fiodorov's ideas influenced Dostoevsky and Vladimir Soloviev, and attracted many followers during the period of the Russian Revolutions.

Soloviev coined the term "*Vseedinstvo*" (organic unity of the whole being). His utopian teaching preached the unity of all Christian churches, unity

27 This term appears in Khomiakov's letter written in 1860 to the editor of *L'Union Chretienne*. See Khomiakov, *Collected Works* vol. 2, pp. 315-314. See also Riazanovsky, "Khomiakov on Sobornost'"

28 Khomiakov, *ibid.*, p. 220.

between man and woman, unity of the individual with the community, with humanity, with nature and with the superior wisdom, which he called Sophia. In his poem “To Prometheus,” (1874) young Soloviev described the moments of mystical elevation as an inner revival which grows from being united with all who are united in the One.²⁹

The concepts of *Sobornost'* and *Vseedinstvo* (sometimes in other terms) were further developed in the philosophical and theological writings of Soloviev's followers during the first half of the 20th century: the brothers Evgeny and Nikolay Trubetzkoy, Viacheslav Ivanov, Lev Karsavin, Semion Frank, Vasily Rozanov, Pavel Florensky, Sergei Bulgakov, Nikolay Berdiaev, Nikolay Lossky, Lev Lopatin, and Vladimir Ern. The mythical power of unity between people was more and more emphasized, and the term “*Sobornost'*” sometimes signified socio-political or even economic ideals within a religious support of Marxist revolution. The deep religious roots of this concept helped the Soviet regime to enforce economical and ideological frames of collectivism in Soviet Russia. Soloviev was a declared teacher of the Russian Symbolist poets Alexandr Blok, Andrey Biely and Viacheslav Ivanov. Early 20th century Russian music, theater and dance cultivated ritual-like collective expression, and similarly, at the turn of the 20th century the idea of sacred togetherness became one of the central themes of Russian literature and thought. There is no wonder that it left clear traces on the Jewish literature and thought created on East European soil. The Russian Silver Age was chronologically concurrent with the Hebrew “Revival” period in literature (1890-1920).

In Russia, against the background of a cultural tradition which assigned moral tasks to literature, European Symbolism was understood as “Decadence,” a movement which encouraged egoism, exempting man from his duties to his fellow man and to society. Condemnation of egoism was a repeated motif in the attacks on Decadence during the 1890s, among which were Gorky's “Paul Verlaine and the Decadents” (1896) and Tolstoy's famous “What is Art?” (1897). Writers who were considered Decadents, like Dmitrii Merezhkovsky, Fiodor Sologub and Zinaida Gippius, also expressed their

29 Soloviev, *Poems, Prose, Letters*, p. 18.

fear of the results of Decadent alienation, which they saw as a symptom of egoism. The first Decadent manifesto in Russian in book form, *Pri sviete soviesti* (*In the Light of Conscience*, 1890) was written by Nikolay Maximovich Minsky, an assimilated Jew who began his literary career in the Russian-Jewish periodicals *Rassviet* and *Voskhod*. Minsky's book begins with denying the existence of altruism, both as a natural psychological drive and as a moral duty. Minsky argued that every human action, including altruistic ones, stems from egoistic motivations. He based the legitimacy of egoism on Schopenhauerian premises, according to which human cognition is subjective, and therefore neither penetration into another's soul nor real empathy is possible. Minsky stated that egoism was an essential trait of the artist, for whom aesthetics should be the only belief and religion. Assimilated Jews in Russia, like Minsky, Akim Volynsky, and later Lev Shestov, had an understandable interest in encouraging the cosmopolitan "Decadent," non-Slavophile orientation in Russia.

In the 1890s, discussions of altruism versus egoism appear in Hebrew journalism. Essays about the crisis of altruism, expressing anti-altruistic opinions, appear in the daily *Hamelitz*. A clear example is Elkhanan Leib Levinsky's "General Love and Individual Hate," published sequentially during 1891. Levinsky wrote that the nineteenth century was a time of illusions: "Egoism has never been more visible in us than nowadays, for the Jew to-day is an animal who loves only itself and its own body (...) Jews love Judaism but hate individual Jews." Levinsky wished for his readers a new year of "Truth, Justice and good deeds, but not of Love, anything, but not Love." A continuation of this trend of thought can be found in Ahad Ha-am's essay "Between Two Opinions" (1910), where he explained that Christian altruism is an inverted egoism, while Jewish morality is based on "abstract justice," which does not distinguish between the self and the other, in personal as well as in national relationships. In contrast, Meir Beck wrote in December 1903 in *Hamelitz* that Judaism was based on the moral ideal of "sacredness or resemblance to God," which was contrary to philosophical moral systems, "whose essence is self-love (Egoismus)."

Sacred Togetherness in Modern Jewish Thought

The idea of sacred togetherness was adopted and developed by Martin Buber, who focused on the Hassidic idea of *havruta* (togetherness), which he tried to turn into a utopian universal ideal.³⁰ His correspondence with Vyacheslav Ivanov during 1927 was perhaps one of the channels through which he became acquainted with the Russian version of this idea.³¹ Together with Gustav Landauer, Buber belonged to the New *Havruta* Group which was founded in 1900 in Berlin. In 1914, Landauer founded “Die neue Gruppe” (the New Group), to which he invited Dmitry Merezhkovsky and Akim Volynsky, active leaders of the “Revolution of the Spirit” movement in Russia.³² In his essay “The Revolution and Us,” Buber wrote that the chances for a new era in Europe depend on an “immediate” Russian approach, which encourages friendship between people, on the one hand, and on the German sense of construction, which molds and assembles material things, on the other.³³ Buber took for granted the unique Russian tendency to develop interpersonal relationships. Like Khomiakov and his followers, Buber viewed *havruta* as a paradoxical situation of personal freedom reached by the individual when he completely intermingles with the community.³⁴ In his first lecture on this theme Buber compared the *havruta* to “a secret marriage,” according to which the motivation for interpersonal and social togetherness is unconsciously erotic, an idea reminiscent of Soloviev’s teaching of Sophiology. Like contemporary Russian God-seekers, Buber viewed *havruta* as a chance for national and universal revolution. “Our *havruta* does not reject Revolution, it is the revolution itself,” he wrote.³⁵ Buber, like Russian God-seekers, opposed aggressive political revolution.

30 Mendes-Flohr, “Buber’s *Havruta*”; Yas’ur, “*Havruta* and Socializm.”

31 Ivanov, “Martin Buber and Viacheslav Ivanov.”

32 According to Dmitry Segal in his talk in a seminar of scholars, the Institute for Advanced Studies, the Hebrew University, May 2002.

33 Buber, “The Revolution and Us,” p. 346.

34 Buber, “The Individual and the Group,” p. 78.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 79.

In 1909 a secular collective way of life was created in Eretz-Israel by the pioneers of the second *aliyah*, who founded the settlement Degania. Aharon David Gordon (1856-1922) was their spiritual leader. Gordon is considered to be influenced by Tolstoyan ideas. It is likely, however, that he also knew about Soloviev and his teaching, because before immigrating to Eretz-Israel (1904) he worked as a secretary in the private library of David Ginzburg, who was a friend and colleague of Soloviev.³⁶ When Gordon encouraged the pioneers of Degania to dance a *hora*, the dance of togetherness, he cried in Russian, "I'll teach you to love freedom,"³⁷ thus expressing the idea of individual freedom within the ecstatic communal togetherness.

Hassidic songs, dances, and other religious rituals were part of life in the pre-state *kibbutzim*.³⁸ In *Kehilatenu* (Our Community, 1922) a collection of documents written by members of the third *aliya*, some of the pioneers describe their life in terms of "mystery," "redemption," "fear of God," "Jacob's ladder," "a temple" "sacredness" and "yearnings for purity and sacredness."³⁹ Total fraternity while giving up egoistical urges was a sacred goal for the members of Bitania, a collective settlement founded in 1912 in the Galilee district. This duty was formulated in mystical terms and practiced in everyday life, sometimes at a high personal cost.⁴⁰ The Russian background of these pioneers is important for the understanding of their mystical inclination. Two rituals which were practiced in these communal settlements witness to the continuity of Hassidic tradition: the communal confession, which was called "the spiritual meal," and the ecstatic *hora* dance, which was treated

36 In 1896 David Ginzburg, the Baron Horace Ginzburg's son, published an article on Kabbalah in the Russian monthly *Voprosy filosofii i psikhologii*, with Soloviev's introduction and footnotes. Soloviev was a frequent visitor in the Ginzburgs' house in St. Petersburg.

37 Friedhaber, "Testimonies of the Horra Dance," p. 120.

38 Shatsker, *The Jewish Youth Movement in Germany*, p. 90. See also Frankel, "The Ideological Motivations"; Bartal, "Kossack and Bedouin"; Don Yihya, "Secularization and Judaism"; Shapira, "The Religious Motifs"; Shapira, *Between Tsemah and Gordon and HaRAIA*; idem, *The Kabbalistic and Hasidic Sources*. On the mystical character of the way of life in the Ha-shomer Ha-tsa'ir kibbutsim see Valer, "The Charm of ha-shomer ha-tsa'ir," esp. pp. 84, 88; idem, "The Fraternity of ha-Shomer ha-Tsa'ir."

39 Zur (ed.), *Our Community*, pp. 30, 33, 34, 35, 36.

40 See, for example the confession of Eliyahu, *ibid.*, pp. 36-37.

like a holy worship.⁴¹ This pre-state Zionist culture contained elements from both Hassidism and Russian neo-mysticism.

The concept of togetherness as a mystical goal is one of the links which join Zionist mystical poetry with traditional Jewish mysticism. The ideology of collectivism in the *kibbutsim* was created and practiced under the double influence of modern European neo-mysticism and Hassidism. The word *kibbutz* is originally a Hassidic term, used by the Braslav Hassidim for their Rosh Ha-Shana meetings. It was adopted for new use in the 1920s by Meir Yaari, the leader of the *Ha-Shomer Ha-Tsa'ir* movement.⁴² Ecstatic collective experiences, including songs, dances, journeys during which the TANACH was read aloud, *kumzitsim* (get-togethers) by the fire at night, and Jewish holidays which were celebrated in Biblical style, were part of Zionist culture.

Sacred Togetherness in Bialik's Poetry

Hebrew *Hasskala* and *Hibat Tsion* poetry, written during the second half of the 19th century in Russia, was far from mysticism. The *Masskalic* poets considered altruism to be the natural behavior of the good, rational man. A high value was attributed by these poets to *akhava* (fraternity). For example, Yehuda Leib Gordon's sonnet "A Brother for Trouble" (1860?) presents life as a stormy sea, full of sudden disasters, where man is a helpless boat, sailing in a starless night, but there is a single star in the darkness, which shows one the way to a place of rest: it is the soul of the faithful friend, "if we could only find him." Mordechai Zvi Maneh's poem "Love and Fraternity" (1883) is a monologue addressed to a friend who lives in New York. Although the friend is far away, he is living in the poet's imagination, where the poet can see, hear, and even kiss him. It is only with him that he can forget all his toil and trouble, for the friend is the only one who can truly penetrate

41 Valer, "The Charm of ha-Shomer ha-Tsa'ir," pp. 93-94; idem, "The Fraternity of Ha-Shomer Ha-tsa'ir," pp. 72-82. On the *hora* dance see Yaffe, "From Petakh Tikva to Kineret," p. 367. On the connection between the Ha-Shomer Ha-Tsa'ir movement and Hassidic Rabbis see Zartal, *The Nest of Youth*, pp. 250-251.

42 Ya'ari, "In a Way Full of Obstacles," p. 890.

the poet's heart and feel together with him. The poem ends with the declaration: "Hurrah! When love is erected upon fraternity/ it stands like the sky for eternity." In *Hibat Tsion* poetry, written in the 1880s-1890s, the nation is personified by the image of a suffering man or (more frequently) woman, and the reader is supposed to partake in the empathy expressed by the poet. The duty to pity any suffering human being and to help the victim of evil was a moral presupposition upon which the duty of national loyalty was founded.

Complete unity — or rather identity — of the individual with the soul of the nation characterizes the lyrical I in many of Hayim Nahman Bialik's poems. For example, in his poem "My Light Was Not Unearned" (1902) the poet says that the source of his creative fire is personal, but while writing, his whole being is burning with a fire which yearns to light his readers' hearts and to mingle with them. The ecstatic, suicidal unity of the poet with his readers is paralleled to *Kiddush ha-shem* (religious martyrdom), but here the readers' spiritual life, not God, is the mystical goal.

Bialik published his first poems during the early 1890s. In his very first poems one can find demonstrations the poet's empathy with the cruel Jewish fate and his pity for the suffering of the Jewish nation. The nation is allegorically presented as a weeping mother, and her tear, a symbol of suffering, is endowed with sacred value. It is even a source of the poet's inspiration. The poet admires and encourages whoever gives up personal interest and suffers willingly for national ideals. Pity for the nation is demanded of the good leader. Suffering is sacred, especially if it is intended to improve the national cause. In "On the Threshold of *Beit-Hamidrash*" (1894) Bialik declared the superiority of the Jewish people over the gentiles. Speaking on behalf of the Jewish people, the poet preferred "to die as sheep" rather than to be one of the "lions," thus hinting a rejection of Nietzschean ideas as they were popularly understood.⁴³ A typical rhetorical device in some of Bialik's early poetry is the address to "my brother" or to "my brethren," expressing the poet's feeling of fraternity and empathy with the sacred suffering of the Jewish people.

Bialik was considered the Jewish "National" poet and the dominant figure in the Hebrew literary Period of Revival. However, a crisis of belief in the sa-

43 Bialik, *Collected Poems 1890-1898*, p. 254.

credness of national togetherness is a frequent theme in his poetry. As early as the beginning of 1893, Bialik expressed the crisis of his belief in fraternity and togetherness in the non-canonized poem “Our Gods of Youth.”⁴⁴ Here the hope that “All human beings will dwell together as if they were one family” is one of the ideas which cheated the poet in his youth. Bialik sent this poem to Ravnitsky, the editor of *Pardes*, together with a letter in which he wrote, “Such a poem does not deserve disgrace even if it were written in a European language — on the contrary!”⁴⁵ It seems that Bialik was conscious of the fact that belief in altruism became unpopular in European fin-de-siècle poetry, and this urged him to express in Hebrew his own pessimistic feelings and ideas.

In the late 1890s, Bialik began writing poems which were clearly under the influence of literary Decadence. In these poems one can find the poet’s dramatic inner conflict between altruistic and anti-altruistic drives — rejection of empathy, alienation from the suffering of the “friend” and fear of the excessive price one had to pay for devotion to another. In “Summer Poems” and “A Summer Day, a Day of Warmth” (both written in 1897) the alienated mood grows from an emotional situation of ennui (*shimamon*), the typical Decadent mood. At the beginning of “A Summer Day, a Day of Warmth,” the poet is full of altruism and empathy for his “friend,” but in the last stanza he asks the friend to leave him alone, because he does not believe in the possibility of sharing his own depressed feelings, implying that his own former empathy was only external. In these poems the address to “my friend” becomes ironic.

In “Bitshuvati” (“Homecoming,” probably written in 1897) the poet, returning to his home after a long absence, feels completely alienated. His grandparents — the representatives of traditional Jewish life — are no more to him than “an old man” and “an old woman.” He sees his grandfather as a lifeless ghost, “the shadow of dry grass oscillating over books.” “The old woman” is knitting stockings, while her lips are automatically whispering curses. Both figures seem mechanical and somewhat demonic. They do not evoke any feelings of love or even empathy in the grandson. In the fifth and last stanza the poet expresses his reaction vis-à-vis the degenerated reality of

44 Ibid, p. 225-226.

45 Miron in Bialik, *Collected poems 1890-1898*, p. 224.

his family. He realizes that this situation is very old, monotonously repeating itself, and will never change. He does not try to change this reality, nor does he run away. He calls out: "I am joining you, my brethren! Together we shall rot and die." The words "my brethren" here, perhaps addressed to the dead flies, rotting in the spider's webs at the western corner of the house's walls, stand in grotesque contrast to the atmosphere of growing abomination which reigns in the previous four stanzas. They certainly do not express unequivocal empathy and fraternity. They can be understood as expressing a sudden frightening consciousness of the suicidal consequences of altruism and familial (national?) togetherness.

The dilemma of loyalty to national togetherness versus individualistic drives becomes sharper in Bialik's famous poem "Alone" (1902).⁴⁶ In this poem the "*Shekhina*," the tenth Kabbalistic *sephira*, represents the collective Jewish spirit (*knesset Israel* in Mishnaic and Talmudic terminology). It is here depicted as a merciful but powerless mother bird-angel, whose wing is broken. She can no longer protect her fledglings, who are flying away from her, drawn by the "wind" (the *Zeitgeist*) and the "light" (of Enlightenment) out of Judaism. She was "divorced" from everywhere, driven away, and now she is dwelling in her last refuge, the corner of the *Beit ha-midrash*, a place which to Bialik symbolized the center of Jewish spirituality. Like his friends, the poet wants to fly out. He feels choked, but he knows that She is now in need of his presence. He feels her loneliness as his own; he and She are one and the same, an inseparable entity of togetherness: "And I was together with her in the distress." He knows that under her wings he might lose many chances, but he cannot disregard her mournful chant of loneliness, echoing his own words. Toward the end of the poem, the emotional stress leading to empathy with the *Shekhina* grows stronger and stronger, and the inner conflict of the speaker grows with it. His decision between staying with the *Shekhina* and leaving her is not explicitly stated, left open to the reader's understanding, but it seems that he must stay, because there is a sacred, inevitable, near-physical unity between him and Her. The call for national loyalty, even if it needs personal sacrifice, comes here from

46 Translation of this poem by Ruth Nevo can be found in Israel-Poetry International Web. A literal translation by Tuvia Rubner can be found in Burnshaw et al., *The Modern Hebrew Poem Itself*.

the mouth of the *Shekhina*, a transcendental being, and thus this poem is an expression of the sacred, metaphysical value attributed by Bialik to national togetherness, even at the cost of losing chances of personal life.

The hope for national revival in Eretz-Israel is a central theme in Bialik's poetry, but its depiction as a religious redemption does not appear in his first poems, written on this theme during the 1890s, even if they stress the importance of togetherness.⁴⁷ Only in the very late 1890s, as Bialik developed an acquaintance with Russian Symbolism, do we find his mystical vision of national revival. A clear example is his poem "*Mishomrim Laboker*" (Watchmen Waiting for the Morning), written in summer 1899:

משמרים לבקר

השמרת לבקר ותרא בדרכך
זיו דמדומי החמה על-סף הרקיע?
אלה קרני ההוד, זה הזהר, הזך,
המתפרצים בנגהות לרחב, לרם,
עד לא-נכון היום.
עד השמש בכבודו הופיע —

הן גם כביר, גם נאור המראה הזה!
וכמו סוד קדושים רבה לפני הגלותו
לבך מלא הגיון — אך אי-זה הפה
שידלנו מלב, יקראנו בשמו
וישיחנו כמו —
איזו לשון שתדע כנותו?

השמרת לבקר ותרא בפרץ-
על שמי עמך זרהי שמשוה ראשונה?
ורבואות קרנים כרך אחר רך
חדו לביא מאורות מפה ומשם,
פרצו קדם יום
ותפרצנה תימנה, צפונה —

47 These poems are "*Birkat Am*" (1894), "*Mikre'i Tzion*" (1898) and "*Im Yesh et Nafshe'kha Lada'at*" (1898).

הן מה-נאָדער, מה-נשגב המחזה הזה!
 אַשרי עין שצפנה קו-אור למשמרת!
 והשיבנו העבים אל-קנים והי —
 אז הקרן ההיא
 בדמעתנו תהי-נא מזהרת.

The title of the poem is an allusion to the mysterious and very expressive sentence in Psalms 130:6 *nafshi le-ha-shem mishomrim la-boker shomrim la-boker* (My soul is [waiting] for God [more than] watchmen for [the] morning, watchmen for morning), comparing the poet's soul, waiting for God, to night watchmen who are waiting impatiently for the morning. The title of Bialik's poem, with this mysterious and ecstatic sentence as its background, prepares the reader for a mystical situation. The poem's style is enigmatic, and many of the words are archaic, so it is very difficult to translate.

Bialik describes the poet's feelings while he is waiting, full of hope, to see the dramatic positive changes in the fate of the Jewish people. The poet feels like one of the nation's guards on night watch, surrounded by darkness, while everybody is asleep, waiting for the sunrise. The vision of national revival is here described as a mystical revelation of divine light in heaven. The expected light (national redemption) is named “*ziv*” (brilliance), “*hod*” (glory, splendor), and “*zohar*” (glamour) — words which have Kabbalistic connotations. The poet stands stupefied before a mysterious secret. This secret is “*sod kdoshim raba*” (a great sacred secret), the Aramaic word “*raba*” (big, great) reminding one of the Aramaic language of the Zohar. When the poet sees the light he cries out: “*Khen mah ne'edar, ma nisgav ha-makhazeh hazeh!*” (Lo how great and sublime is this vision!) The word *ne'edar*, alluding to “*mi kamokha ne'edar ba-kodesh*” (Exodus 15:11), expresses the admiration caused by the revelation of God. The words “*u-ve-hashbiakh et rigshat libeinu ha-peh*” (When our mouths will calm down the excitement of our hearts) alludes to “*meshbiakh she'on yamim she'on galeihem va-hamon le'umim*” (Psalms 65:8). They testify that the experience itself cannot be expressed by words; the words can emerge only after the vision has disappeared and the watchers calm down. The use of first person plural shows that the excitement is a collective experience.

Three out of the four stanzas of this poem are written in the first person singular, while in the fourth and last stanza the experience becomes collective. This stanza says: “Happy is the eye who could keep the memory of this ray of light, for when the words will calm down our great excitement, and the clouds will return us to mourning and weeping, this ray will glitter with our tear.” The words Bialik used here for the glittering of the ray of light (“*maz’heret*” from the root Z.H.R) make it clear that the collective tear has a mystical redemptive power and can create light even when there is none. The two last lines are based on the Lurianic idea of the broken vessels: sparks of divine light glitter in the nation’s collective tear, waiting for redemption. The whole atmosphere of this poem is that of a mystical vision which appears for a very short time and then disappears.

In other poems, Bialik criticized the Messianic-apocalyptic view of national revival which was popular in Zionist literature and thought against the background of Russian revolutionary literature (see ch. 7). Thus in Bialik’s long poem “The Dead of the Desert” (1902), apocalyptic redemption, initiated by the mythological dead of the desert, is no more than an episode, bringing no real change in the eternal static situation. In the long poem “The Scroll of Fire” (1905), a blind collective march toward redemption leads the group to drown in the river of death. In his essay “The March Kingdom” (1918) Bialik described how the artificial music of a military march, played while soldiers are marching together in the city’s street, takes control over the variety of individual noises, natural to life and needed for true art.

Bialik’s attitude to the idea of sacred togetherness, like his attitude to other ideas, was ambivalent.

Sacred Togetherness in Pre-State Poetry

In Avraham Ben-Yitzhak’s poems one can also find ambivalent treatments of collective experiences — they can be treated as a mysterious, ecstatic, semi-religious event or as a childish madness. In an unpublished, untitled poem, Ben-Yitzhak described the semi-religious collective feeling of people who march together, carrying a flag:

שְׂגֵעוֹן עֵינַיִם
 וְלֹא תְנוּדַת רֶגֶל
 פְּנִימֵי חֲרָרִים עוֹד מְעֻט וְיִכְבוּ
 וְעַל כָּלֵם יִבְעַר הַדֶּגֶל.
 הֵיא מְתַקֵּן חֲרָדַת הַשּׁוֹפָר
 עַת הָאֶסְפָּר הַתּוֹעִים.
 הֵיא פְעַם דָּם מִיַּד לְיַד
 הֵיא הַגְדִּיל הַיּוֹם לְפָרֶחַ
 כְּבָעִינֵי יְלָדִים.⁴⁸

(Madness of eyes/ No movement of feet/ Dry faces soon to be extinguished/
 And over all the flag is burning.// Oh the sweet trembling of the ram's horn/
 While the erring are collected./ Oh the beat of blood from hand to hand/ Oh
 the day has greatly flowered/ Like in children's eyes.)

The experience is of extreme emotional force, nearing madness. The ecstasy is expressed by, among other, the use of three repetitions of the excited “Oh” (without an exclamation mark). The first lines focus on the marchers’ eyes, which seem so full of madness that it freezes their movements. The march is transformed into a static image, as if seen in a picture, in a dream or in a vision. The (red?) flag is compared to a fire, burning temporarily upon the marchers’ faces, which will soon be extinguished. Their inner life is very dry. The word *khareirim*, which the poet uses to describe the dryness of the faces, alludes to “*ve-shakhan khareirim ba-midbar*” (And he will live on dry bread in the desert, Jeremiah 17:6), illustrating dryness by its sound. The fire-like flag is the marchers’ source of vitality. The flag is compared here to the *shofar*, which is used on The Day of Atonement, the most sacred day of the year, when all Jews are gathering for prayer. The words “*pa’am dam mi-yad le-yad*” describe the marchers who step rhythmically hand in hand, as if they share a flow of common blood, which streams from one person to another and beats in the rhythm of their steps. The poem ends with the marchers’ feeling of rebirth, engendered by the greatness of the day. Their eyes appear again in the last line, now expressing not madness but childish astonishment and joy.

48 Ben-Yitzhak, *Poems*, p. 47.

Do the repetitions of the cry “Oh” express the poet’s empathy with the marchers’ experience or his irony? Do their childish eyes express pure truth or naivety? In other words, does the poet express his excitement or his alienation from the ecstatic experience of togetherness? It seems that the poem includes both possibilities.

The same ambiguity about the sacredness of unity between people can be found in Ben-Yitzhak’s following very short untitled poem: /: אָל דָּם קוּרָא: דָּם עֵבֶר גְּבוּלֶיךָ / מִתְהוֹמֹת מַעֲיָיִךְ / יַעֲלֶה הַבּוֹרָא (Blood calls Blood:/ transgress your borders/ from the abyss of your fountains/ God will rise).⁴⁹ The poem probably deals with the possibility of unity among people of different “blood,” of different ethnic or racial origin, or people of different souls (“the blood is the soul,” Dt 12:23). In the three last lines of the poem blood’s voice is heard, calling people to cross over their physical or mental borders and unite. The blood seems to envision the mythical, cosmic redemptive influence of such a unity: it will cause a revelation and the opening of a secret fountain in the abyss, and from this abyss God the creator will rise. God is to be found not above, but deep down in the abyss, not in the spirit but in the blood! We have here a Vitalistic (characteristic of the philosophy of Vitalism, popular in Western Europe during the early 20th century) version of the collective mystical experience, in which the source of redemption is the body and the blood. They become sacred. Does the blood’s voice express the poet’s view about the sacredness of blood, or does the poem reflect early 20th century views from a stance of criticism and anxiety? This poem, too, leaves the answer open for the reader to decide.

Ben-Yitzhak’s “The Lonely Say” (see ch.1) is a collective monologue, paradoxically in the voices of a group of lonely people. The poem describes their possible inner revival, if, after dispersing to “seven directions,” they will return “in One” to their Jewish spiritual origin. The human unity is here a condition of the mystical redemption. Did the poet himself take part in such a process? What we know about his biography does not confirm this possibility. Maybe the poem describes Ben-Yitzhak’s yearning for such an experience, and his feeling that for him, this was possible only in death.

49 Ibid., p. 29.

Massada (1927), Yitzhak Lamdan's long poem (or rather, cycle of poems), was considered to be "The Bible of the Third *Aliya* (Zionist immigration)."⁵⁰ It was understood to express the drama of Zionist pioneers' overcoming of common difficulties and was interpreted as a testimony of the Zionist collective spirit. *Massada* became part of Zionist festivals. It was read aloud as a *massekhet*, a genre of choir reading of poetic texts, popular in Zionist festivals and rituals. This genre of choir speaking symbolized togetherness.

Massada was written in the context of life in the *kibbutzim*, founded ten years earlier by members of the Third *Aliya*, who saw themselves and their collective life in mystical terms. So did they seem to onlookers as well: Gershom Scholem wrote in his memoirs that Yehuda Yaari's soul "was yearning to unity of generations, beginning with the Hassidic rise of the Baal-Shem-Tov and Rabbi Nahman of Braslav and ending with the Third *Aliya*."⁵¹

Three of *Massada*'s poems — "The Chain of Dances," "Enthusiasm," and "Encouragement" — describe the ecstatic *Horra* dance, which was part and parcel of the Zionist rituals as a mythical and redemptive collective activity. Lamdan described the collective dance as a cosmic revolution which was changing the world, and at the same time also uniting the dancers with God and with the whole Jewish people. In the dance the pioneers seem to cry out: "Yesterdays collapse at our feet./ Kneel down,/ hei, to-morrows! Prepare the present/ pave our way! (...) World, bow down your bald head/ before our redemptive dance/ God, together with us in the circle of dance,/ will sing "Israel."⁵² The *Horra* dance is described here as both a world revolution and a Jewish continuation of the Hassidic dance. Throughout the whole cycle of poems the poet lays stress on acts which create continuity between the pioneers and their Jewish past. In the poem "From Bonfire to Bonfire," the fires which the pioneers light continue the fires which burnt Jewish martyrs. The dance is described as a walk with closed eyes over the abyss. (In Bialik's "Scroll of Fire" such a group walk brings disaster!) Lamdan wrote that the Jewish dance was always a collective rescue from sadness and despair. If the dancers open their

50 Barash, "Lamdan," p. 4. On the reception of *Massada* see Hadari, "The Attitude to *Massada*."

51 Scholem, *From Berlin To Jerusalem*, p. 211.

52 Lamdan, *Massada*, pp. 38, 40.

eyes, their joy will be transformed into deep despair: “They knew, they knew, your forefathers/ that they are dancing over abysses/ and if they open their eyes - / the fountains of happiness will close,/ the chain will split and crumble.”⁵³ The poem “*Havdala*” (benediction of the wine at the end of the Shabbat) calls for the continuation of the old Jewish tradition of differentiation between the sacred and the non-sacred by means of separating the “pure” from the “poisoned” wine of Jewish traditions: “We came to Massada with the goblet of *havdala* in our hands/ in it a remnant of our ancient last wine is to be found./ This wine is mixed with poison, poison of our delusions (...) the goblet of differentiation in our hands, we shall know the difference between this remnant of our wine/ and the poison mixed in it/ lest we drink them together.”⁵⁴

Massada was interpreted as a continuation of Bialik’s “Scroll of Fire”:⁵⁵ in both long poems the tension between loneliness and redemptive togetherness is a central theme. Both the group and the individual have to choose between different ways to redemption, only one of which — the most difficult — is the right one. In *Massada*, like in “The Scroll of Fire,” there are moments of climax after which come moments of falling and great despair. But while in “The Scroll of Fire” the sacred mission is carried out at last by a very lonely hero, *Massada* ends with belief in the victory of the whole sacred group. In *Massada* there are detailed descriptions of loneliness and hesitations, but the final message is that unity with the group and with the Jewish past is a mystical path to the Zionist goal.

In the early poetry of Nathan Alterman, joy is a mystical goal. It is symbolized by a divine anonymous Woman, whom the poet loves and worships (see ch. 6). In Alterman’s first book, “Stars Outside” (1938), this joy is his own, but in his second book, “The Joy of the Poor” (1941), the experience is both individual and national. In this cycle of poems the poet realizes that joy was known to him in his childhood and youth, when he was together with his friends. Joy was lost when this experience of group friendship disappeared.⁵⁶

53 Ibid., p. 38.

54 Ibid., p. 75.

55 Kurzweil, “National consciousness,” p. 58.

56 This experience is the theme of three sequential poems, “The Tambourine,” “The Stranger Remembers his Friends,” and “The Walk in the Wind,” see Alterman, *Poems From Long Ago*, pp. 179-186.

In “The Tambourine” the multitude of people in the streets, who were part of the poet’s childhood, are compared to a huge mythological animal which drums on the tambourine, ringing sounds of joy. In the poet’s memory, the human togetherness in the street — even in times of economic poverty and lack of human rights — was a mysterious source of huge power, joy and vitality. In the poem “The Stranger Remembers his Friends,” the poet confesses that even in Eretz-Israel he has remained joined to his dead friends abroad, and therefore considers himself a member of the “living dead.” He describes himself as being devoured by his nostalgia for the friendship he lost, like by a powerful mythological beast. “Friendship — a she-wolf, a she-wolf/ I cannot calm her down, my brethren./ She has broadened at me her unquenchable mouth/ O most modest among the desires of the living.” In this poem friendship is *ot u-vrit*: a sacred sign of a Covenant, referring to “*ki ot hu beini u-veineikhem le-doroteikhem*,” (Exodus 31:13) where the Shabbat is the sacred sign of Covenant between the people of Israel and God. In the poem “The Walk in the Wind” the joy of the group is a divine power which aggressively dominates the material world; it “tears the material clothes.” In a prophetic tone, the poet envisions the return of collective joy: “Our joy will walk and laugh/ and our mirth will be elevated in the wind.” The last words, “*ve-alah tsoholeinu ba-ru’akh*” remind one of the Day of Atonement’s text, “*ya’aleh (...) ve-yeir’eh rinuneinu ad erev*.” These allusions strengthen the impression that Alterman attributed mystical sacredness to collective joy, the joy of friendship.

In Alterman’s “The Joy of the Poor,” unlike in Lamdan’s “Massada,” the collective joy was not created by the Zionist pioneers, but by life in the poet’s European Jewish childhood. The revelation of this fact — that joy and togetherness existed in traditional Judaism in the Diaspora no less, and maybe even more, than in Eretz-Israel — is a central point in the message of “The Joy of the Poor,” in which the Zionist “negation of the Diaspora” is reconsidered by the poet. However, in the optimistic ending of this cycle of poems, the poet promises “a day of exultation and redemption” when the dying Jewish Diaspora will revive in the Promised Land. This revival is described as a return to the experience of fraternity: “You will live among brethren, my daughter.”⁵⁷

57 Ibid., p. 223.

Joy as a mystical situation is a Hassidic idea, but in Hassidism joy is only a means, a way to *dveikut* (unity with God), while Alterman saw joy itself as a mystical goal. Alterman's joy is aggressive, transgressing moral boundaries, a wild Dionysian joy. Such an understanding of joy and vitality can be found in the teaching of Nietzsche and his followers in Symbolist Russian poetry (Balmont, Viacheslav Ivanov) as well as in the poetry of the post-Symbolist poet and prose writer Boris Pasternak, whose poetry had a strong influence on the young Alterman.

The theme of mystical togetherness in pre-state Hebrew poetry is closely connected with the acknowledgement of the value — or even the sacredness — of the Zionist project. Nature poems, where an individual speaker might be expected, are sometimes written in the first person plural, “we.” Ayin Tur-Malka (Aliza Greenberg, born in 1926) in her mystical poem “The Being’s Diving in Light” wrote: “Like dawn in Jerusalem our souls rise like burning palms/ and wash in the light of the rising sun.”⁵⁸ In another poem she wrote “Like a plant we are in the *field of God* / and with the dripping of dew/ to You our wandering soul will return - - -”(underlined in the original).⁵⁹ This is not ideological or political collectivism, but an authentic emotional unity of the poet with the nation, which produces religious yearnings and mystical ecstasy.

Sacred Togetherness in Israeli Poetry

Many of the poems of Amir Gilboa express the way he experienced the dramatic events which took place in 20th century Jewish history. In these poems we often find the poet's belief in the power of emotional solidarity and togetherness. In the poem “From Speech It Rises,” written in Livorno, Italy, while Gilboa was a soldier in the Jewish Brigade during the Second World War, intimate conversation between the soldiers is described as a mythological event or a mystical situation: “From Speech it rises, the Courage, from speech of one friend to another./ And his words are commandments of faith which he picked at the corner of the field and at the corner of the street/

58 Tur-Malka, *Return, My Soul* p. 46.

59 *Ibid.*, p. 156.

and at the rungs of the ladders/ by which each baby rises to Heaven.”⁶⁰ By “ladder” the poet alludes to Jacob’s ladder, which angels were traversing from earth to Heaven and back. Conversation between the soldiers is compared here to a religious ritual which creates contact between man and God. The words *dibbur* (speech, also used in the expression *ha-dibbur ha-elohi*, the word of God) and *gvurah* (courage, also one of the Kabbalistic *sephirot*) have mystical connotations. “Courage” and “faith” are paralleled here, which means that the poet sees faith as needed no less than courage in the battlefield. He describes the conversation between the soldiers as a situation of spiritual elevation. He further describes the talks metaphorically as sparks gathered from faraway places, mounting the ladder. At the time of group talking, when these sparks are collected together, a process of integration and mythical unification takes place. The words, like pearls in a piece of jewelry, are set in the world and transform it into Heaven. We have here a variation of the Lurianic myth of *tikkun*, the group conversation playing the role of mystical activity.

In another poem, also written during the Second World War (in this case in “Haag-Brussels”), Gilboa described the collective mystical experience as a dream which transforms all its dreamers into one mythical being whose dwelling is in the upper worlds. The first poem (out of three) in the cycle “First Words” reads:

שָׁאֲנוּ חוֹלְמִים אֲבָנִים קְשׁוּרוֹת לְטַבּוֹרָנוּ
 — וְאִנְחָנוּ עֲפִים —
 וְכָל הַקּוֹלוֹת בְּפִינוּ.
 אֲלֵף חֲלִילִים רוֹדְפִים בְּהוֹלִים לְהִשִּׁיג דָּרְכָם
 אֲחֲרֵינוּ
 וּבְשָׂמִים אֲזַכֵּךְ כָּל-כָּךְ הַרְבֵּה שְׂבִילִים!
 שָׁאֲנוּ חוֹלְמִים זוֹרְקִים גְּבִישִׁים עֵינֵיהֶם
 אֶל בּוֹנֵי עוֹלָמוֹת.
 כָּל הַפְתָּחִים קוֹרְאִים לָנוּ פְּנִימָה לְבֹא
 וְאִנְחָנוּ רוֹאִים הַכֹּל כְּמוֹ עַל כָּף
 וְאֵף פֶּעַם לֹא עוֹבְרִים
 אֶת הַפֶּף.⁶¹

60 Gilboa, *Poems* vol. 1, p. 89.

61 *Ibid.*, p. 136.

(While we are dreaming stones are tied to our navels/ and we are flying — /
And all the voices are in our mouths./ A thousand flutes urgently hasten to
catch us/ And in Heaven there are so many roads! // Dreaming we are throw-
ing crystal stones/ to the builders of the Worlds./ All entrances are calling us
to come inside/ and we see everything as if on a palm/ and we never pass/ the
threshold.)

A whole group has a common dream. Although loaded with heavy stones, they manage to fly up into the sky. The common dream transforms the stones into heavenly crystals, which are thrown and passed over by the dreamers to heavenly beings who are building new worlds. The builders of the new worlds are perhaps the Zionists in Eretz-Israel, whom the poet, who is still abroad, hopes to join, and for whom he feels deep admiration. For him their mission has mythological dimensions. The common dream is a source of power, which enables a passage from human to divine worlds. The situation is fantastic, miraculous: the dreamers can fly in spite of their heavy load, quicker than the voice of a thousand flutes, and reach the roads of heaven. The upper worlds open before them and enable them “to see all, as if on a palm,” like in an apocalyptic vision. In the last line the poet parallels the spiritual achievement of the dreamers with unity with God, which in Orthodox Judaism cannot be totally achieved (“No living man can see Me,” Exodus 33:20).

An untitled poem which opens Amir Gilboa’s book *Poems in the Morning in the Morning* (1953) describes the bursting open of the way to Jerusalem, which was disconnected from the other parts of the country during the Independence War in 1948, as a collective mystical experience:

היינו כחוזרים אל חלום.
קושרי נתוקים אל שכלם.
שוב ענה זוהר על גגות ירשלים
שמש צעיר .
ואם ער ואם חולם
סלם נצב, בו נעלות
התר עם שלם.⁶²

62 Ibid., p. 274.

(We were as though coming back to a dream. /Disconnections were bound to the whole [*shalem* — also the ancient name of Jerusalem]. / Again, on the roofs of Yerushlem [also an old biblical name of Jerusalem], glimmering, a young sun was mounting./ And — whether awake or dreaming —/ a ladder stood there, / striving to mount on it/ a whole nation was there.)

For Gilboa it was not Jerusalem which was disconnected; the other parts of the country (and parts of the nation) were disconnected from it. Alluding to “When God returned us to Zion we were as though in a dream” (Psalms 126:1), the poet describes the experience of unity as not only geographical but also historical: disconnected parts of the nation, the past and the present, are being united in Jerusalem. This double unification is described here as a double mounting. The sun is mounting on the roofs of Jerusalem and the whole nation is mounting on a ladder like Jacob’s, without the help of angels, for it’s the nation itself that has performed the miracle. This image of mounting symbolizes both the national rejuvenation and the nation’s return to its ancient sources.

In this short poem, Gilboa expressed his reaction to a specific military event which was for him an ecstatic collective experience, taking place not on the topographical-military level, but on spiritual and metaphysical levels. Like Alterman and Lamdan, Gilboa also attributed sacredness to the national togetherness which united the carriers of Zionism with the old Jewish tradition. The event was described as an ancient common dream which the whole nation is dreaming together. The mounting of the ladder takes place while the nation is partly awake and partly dreaming (“whether awake or dreaming”). In an interview, Gilboa said: “In a dream you are omnipotent. You can join together different times and events, all the concepts, all the feelings, maybe because in the dream you are the creator, you are the ruler.”⁶³ For Gilboa, man becomes God-like in the world of dreams.

Gilboa’s poem “I Knew in a Dream,”⁶⁴ written after the Six Day War, more explicitly expresses the poet’s astonishment at the possibility of a common dream which is shared by the whole nation: “I knew in a dream thousands

63 Gilboa, “Interview.”

64 Gilboa, *Poems*, vol. 2, p. 83.

are dreaming within me (...) Here she is before me. Jerusalem/ And I see I see with thousands of eyes./ Has there ever been such a thing/ a dream which is dreamt/ by the thousands while dreaming.” The poet said: “In this poem I expressed everything which I have felt during my whole life and during the years when we could not lay our feet in Jerusalem — not only I was there, but also my home [in Europe] and all those generations that could not see this, and the Jewish nation which was exterminated into ashes.”⁶⁵

Another two of Gilboa’s poems, “We in a New Judgment” and “A Holiday,”⁶⁶ describe the holiday celebration of the Zionist pioneers as a mystical ritual. “We in a New Judgment” opens with the statement that the various activities of the pioneers are tantamount to Jewish prayers and blessings: “One blesses *yitgadal* [Kadish] while standing and we bless while walking./ While running. While rowing. While mounting [also: immigrating to Israel].” In other words, what religious people do while praying and blessing, we do through activities which realize the Zionist dream. Later the poem says: “we cover these deeds with the light of *Things* [also: Words, underlined in the original].” The underlined word refers to absolute, sacred things, alluding to Psalms 104:2, where God is “covered with light like with a garment.” Further in the poem, we read that the light of Things enables one to see whether those deeds are valuable, “whether lawful/ whether being played/ whether good/ whether *redeeming* (underlined in the original).” The words “*mitnag-nim*” (being played) and “*moshi'im*” (redeeming) hint at the mystical value of the pioneers’ deeds, and also at their link with Hassidism, where singing and playing were considered a means of contact with the upper worlds. The pioneers’ faces have here mythical dimensions: they are “open to Day and to Wind/ kissing the whole world.” Later the poem says that this generation creates “a new judgment (*mishpat*, also: sentence), in order to give the time a new name (*shem*, also: God. Underlined in the original).” The underlined word, again, directs the reader to the possibility that the pioneers not only create a new language by speaking Hebrew, they also create a new sacredness, a new God. The poet also states in this poem that when a father raises

65 Gilboa, “Interview.”

66 Gilboa, *Poems*, vol. 1, pp. 310, 339.

a family in the new-old country he “broadens the circles of honor (*kavod*),” here alluding to the expression “the honor of God” and to Honor as one of the Kabbalistic *sephirot*. The poem ends by saying that the creative, mythical powers of this generation are rooted in ancient Jewish powers: “for we give birth by their power and by ours.”

The poem “A Holiday” describes the members of one of the *kibbutzim* in the Valley of *Izra'el* as they are gathering for a festival: “Wide, wide is the circle of light around the table/ and beautiful are the voices of the banquet./ Deeply fragrant they descend from the high mountain/ and they are the symbols of the ritual:/ voices of flowers/ in the holiday of brothers/ when brothers sit/ to the table.// Flowers from the mountains/ grow in the valley/ And pure white is their color.// These are voices which sing their ways of life/ when this people is speaking/ in its holy day.” The members of the kibbutz are circled with a halo and mysterious perfumes of flowers, as if they are members of a ritual or a cult. Their white shirts are compared to white flowers, which also become a symbol of their collective way of life and brotherhood, which seems sacred to the poet.

It is difficult to find Israeli poets who continue to describe the national experience as a collective mystical experience. What was part and parcel of the pre-state Zionist culture became passé already in the mid-1950s, and an object of criticism and attacks towards the end of the 20th century. Rivka Miriam’s early poetry is an exception. Her second book of poems, *I Drowned in Windows* (1969), includes a few poems which describe the mysterious, reviving unification of the poet with the Jewish whole. In the poem “My People,”⁶⁷ written on May 3, 1966, when she was 14, the poet is searching for her people, but she cannot find them in either on the earth or in “the foggy body of my old, great God.” She reveals Him in herself, while losing herself in a feeling of self-annihilation and unity with Nothingness. Later she suddenly finds the Jewish people, which also disappeared in Nothingness, in herself, and she gives birth to it: “And I suddenly heard in the deep silence/ trembling strings from my depths./ I tore my depths to pieces, I scattered it,/ my body disappeared,/ I closed my eyes and I saw:/ my People emerged from myself.”

67 Rivka Miriam, *I Drowned in the Windowst*, p. 15.

A later poem, “I Struck a Root,”⁶⁸ describes the miraculous feeling of fusion with one’s roots as an ecstatic experience. With repeating cries of joy and excitement the poet calls her “people brothers,” telling them that she — her whole body, her whole being — was transformed into a root: “I struck a root/ people brothers — I struck a root (..) And my front is a root and my back (alluding to “And you shall see only my back” said by God to Moses in Exodus 33:23) is a root / and my future is a root / and my history is a root/ and the dream in my eyelids is a root./ People brothers — my darlings.” By becoming a root the poet becomes a mythological, God-like being, for she becomes one with the history of the Jewish people.

In Rivka Miriam’s early poems the fusion with the Jewish people is a result of her identification with the generation of the *Shoah* (which in this period of life she also expressed in her paintings). In her poem “That Generation Embraced Me On the Sea Shore” the poet’s feeling of complete spiritual closeness to and belonging with the generation of the Shoah, in contrast to the feelings of young Israelis of her age who distance themselves from these people, is compared to the feelings of a woman who voluntarily devotes herself to a man and lets him make love to her because she feels that he has such a great need for her:

הדור ההוא חִבְּקֵנִי עַל שְׁפֵת הַיָּם
 שָׁם לִטַּף אוֹתִי וּבָא עֲלַי.
 תָּמִיד יֵשׁ לְהִבִּיט עַל דֹּרוֹת מִרְחוֹק
 אֲךָ הַדּוֹר הַהוּא בָּא אֵלַי קְרוֹב, קְרוֹב
 כְּדֵי לְרְאוֹתֵנִי
 וְהִיא זְקוּקָה מְאֹד לְמִגֵּעַ
 כִּיֹּן שְׂכָלָם רַק מִמְרַחֲקִים צִפּוּ בּוֹ.
 הַדּוֹר הַזֶּה רָאשׁוּ בְּחִיקִי
 שְׂאֲבָחַשׁ בְּשַׁעְרוֹ שְׂשִׁיבָה לֹא עָלְתָה בּוֹ
 וְשָׁם עַל שְׁפֵת הַיָּם חִבְּקֵנִי,
 לִטַּף אוֹתִי וְעָלִי בָּא.⁶⁹

68 Rivka Miriam, *The Voices Toward Them*, p. 46.

69 Ibid., p. 12.

(This generation embraced me on the sea shore/ there he caressed me and came to me [made love to me]./ One should always look at generations from far away/ but this generation came to me close, close/ so he can see me/ and was very much in need of a touch/ because they all looked at him from great distances./ The generation laid down his head in my lap/ so I shall stir his hair which did not grow white/ and there on the sea shore he embraced me/ caressed me and came to me). Characteristic to Rivka Miriam's poetry is the extraordinary mixture of self-mythologizing with realistic details and of ecstasy with humorous tones. Here she expresses the ecstasy of being one with the whole generation of the *Shoah*, which for her symbolizes the fate of the Jewish people, in images which parallel herself with the divine world, and the generation with a lover with whom she plays.

Itamar Ya'oz-Kest (born in Hungary, 1934, survived the *Shoah*) in his poem "Individual Prayer Collective Prayer"⁷⁰ described himself in the synagogue on The Day of Atonement, ready for prayer, suddenly feeling that his prayer has no right to be an individual prayer, because he is full to capacity with a multitude of mouths. "All the owners of the voices were already sitting within me like in a very old *kloiz* (Eastern European *beit midrash*)."⁷⁰ These voices demand from the poet that he pray together with them, and so it happens, without his making any effort. When the poet hears the sound of the *shofar*, he suddenly understands that he has always been "a vessel which cannot be filled on his own, and therefore I am never satisfied." Only now, when he feels united with his people, does he find ecstatic happiness. The experience of togetherness takes place together with the blowing of the *shofar*, symbolizing a moment of close contact with God.

Common to Amir Gilboa, Rivka Miriam and Itamar Ya'oz-Kest is the connection between the loyalty to family relatives who were murdered in the *Shoah* and the feeling of sacred, mystical unity with the Jewish people.

In the poems which have been examined in this chapter the mystical experience grows from a situation of real or imagined unity of the individual with a group. In the poems of Zelda (Schneieurson-Mishkovsky, 1914-1984) intimate inter-personal relationships are described as mystical experiences. In

70 Itamar Ya'oz-Kest, *Mounting*, p. 37.

her poem "One River Flows to the Sea"⁷¹ the poet's acquaintance with a woman whom she meets in a hospital brings about a sudden transformation, a disembodiment: "A very strange creature I was when I went out from the house/ of pain: my soul, from the tips of my fingers, was disembodied (also: extended) so to say." Such a disembodiment is a symptom of mystical unity in Hassidism and earlier Jewish mysticism. In the same poem the poet also describes her anxiety of being too intimate with a boy who is a mental patient. When she comes to visit him, she imagines him saying to her: "Thank God that you came (...) there are nine hundred ninety nine rooms of darkness in my soul/ and one room of brilliance. You are brave. You will not/ be afraid to enter into the bears' cave of my insanities/ and to light a candle there." The boy's soul is metaphorically described here as a series of graded rooms, an image which was used in Hassidism to symbolize the graded space of the upper world which is the way to God. The poet, however, refrains from explicit intimacy with this boy, knowing that even without it she is very close to him: "I and you are one river which flows to a sea and there are no/ scissors to cut one wave from the other." Lighting a candle in the soul of the mentally ill boy is here a mystical goal which the poet is not brave enough to achieve.

Zelda's poem "The Crippled Beggar"⁷² opens with the poet feeling that the invalid beggar is spoiling the beauty of nature with his ugliness and his weeping, and that his miserable presence is a curtain which disturbs her from feeling the closeness to God: "The crippled beggar is weeping,/ his tears cover the color of the sun/ cover the flowers./ His tears are / a smoky partition between me and God." She feels that the beggar's suffering aggressively demands from her to forget herself, to deny her own existence: "The crippled beggar is spitting at my face/ for not forgetting myself/ for not dying." The poem ends with a surprising revelation: the poet admits her failure to achieve sacred contact with the soul of the suffering human being: "His despise is right./ To the inner, quiet point,/ which exists in the heart of the lost one as well,/ to the pole of immortality which exists in the heart of the mad one as well,/ I did not hand out my whole self./ I have almost forgotten that he too, the poor one/ is a relative

71 Zelda, *Poems*, pp. 42-43.

72 *Ibid.*, p. 37.

of the sun,/ that his soul will be transformed into a rose/ in the twilight.” “The inner point” is an expression which appears in the *Tania*, the most important HABADic text, as a metaphor for the point of meeting between the human divine sparkle and the “light of God,” a meeting which can take place only after the cancellation of corporeal desires, on the one hand, and the awakening of heavenly mercy on the other.⁷³ This expression appears here and in Zelda’s other poems⁷⁴ as a secret, mysterious inner domain in the soul of the Other, which can be completely reached only by complete devotion and self-annihilation, in the same way that unity with God demands full devotion and even readiness to die. In “The Crippled Beggar” this domain is also called “the pole of immortality” — Zelda’s idiosyncratic expression — which hints at the transcendent status which the poet attributes to this inner point in the soul of the suffering Other. The ending of the poem refers to its opening: at first the beggar seemed to the poet a partition between herself and nature, as represented by the sun and the flowers, but in the end she understood that his soul, which she did not manage to reach completely, is itself a sacred, beautiful symbolic sun or a rose. Like in Zelda’s poem “Every Rose”⁷⁵ (see ch. 1), here too the rose is a symbol of mystical sacredness.

In contrast to poets who described the collective experience as a joyful redemption, Zelda’s poems emphasized the difficulties of achieving this goal, describing it as a test which the poet herself fails. Zelda described the path to the mystical goal as an emergence from the ivory tower of egoistic individuality, and even as giving up aesthetic pleasures for the sake of fusion with the suffering Other. It is a way which demands devotion according to the Kabbalistic and Hassidic concept of spiritual *Kiddush Ha-shem* (martyrdom). It is noteworthy that although Zelda was an Orthodox religious woman, in her poems she did not follow the traditional Jewish idea of mystical togetherness, preferring to see the contact between two individuals as a mystical goal. She also viewed extreme altruism, sacrifice and even martyrdom as a condition of mystical unity. Such a concept of the religious ideal is not far from Soloviev’s

73 RASHAZ, *Tania*, Last Copybook, note no 181.

74 “The Bad Neighbor,” “Like the Flower of the Valley,” “Shocked by Nostalgia” in Zelda, *Poems*, pp. 41, 56, 176.

75 *Ibid.*, p. 59.

and his followers' idea of redemption, an idea which Bialik in his long poem "The Scroll of Fire" rejected. The possibility that Zelda, as well as her grandfather Rabbi David Zvi Chen and her uncle Avraham Chen, were acquainted with those Russian ideas is not far-fetched. Zelda could also have become acquainted with these ideas from the writings of Rabbi Kook, which she had read and admired.⁷⁶

In spite of the fact that mysticism became more and more attractive in Israeli poetry during the last quarter of the 20th century, it is difficult to find now, even in poetry written by religious people, descriptions of mystical ecstasy which is achieved through intimate interpersonal or collective contact. Mystical experience and mystical life are generally described as extremely individual. This view is clearly expressed in Binyamin Shvili's poem, *Sarei Yekhidim* (Ministers of Individuals, [the word "sarei" echoes the word "sharei" = singers]): "We do not have parents we do not have children beloveds/ of flesh and blood we do not have homes we have God/ we do not have him in heaven and not in the depths not/ in stones we do not have prophets we do not have teachers/ we do not have permitted books we do not have/ forbidden books we have God we do not have Him in love/ we do not have Him in hatred we do not have Him in friendship/ we do not have nothing but I we do not have nothing but I myself/ we are ministers [singers] of individuals." The poem is written in the first person plural, thus implying that the speaker belongs to a whole group of people who devoted themselves only to God. This devotion is here a result of disconnection from all human relationships.

Against this background my own poem, "A Blue Table" (written in the 1980s), is a lonely voice of nostalgia to the lost Israeli-Jewish togetherness:

A Blue Table

We'll have a large blue table,
a table set for us all,
a table covered with light,
perfectly round.

76 On the acquaintance of Rabbi Kook and Rabbi Shmuel Alexandrov with Soloviev's writings see Bar-Yosef, "The Jewish Reception of Valdimir Soloviev."

And we'll sit at it on Sabbath eve
our elbows kissing
as Joseph kissed his younger brother Benjamin
after so many years
and voicelessly we'll sing *Shalom Aleichem*
and we'll all drink of the wine from one cup
together with the angels, according to age.

The table will then turn again on its axis
daily, and at night
we'll all say
together
*amen.*⁷⁷

77 Bar-Yosef, *Night, Morning*, p. 215.

CHAPTER SIX

Unity as an Erotic Experience

Mystical Experience and Eros

In Jewish, Christian and Moslem mystical writings, unity with God and yearnings for such unity are often described in erotic or sexual terms. In these religions, mystical texts were sometimes originally written (or sung) about corporeal love, and later metaphorically used for spiritual religious themes. *The Song of Songs* is a clear example. The type of double reading and interpretation such texts require — as both idealized love poems, using mystical images as metaphors, and poems which erotically describe spiritual ecstasy — are often needed by modern Hebrew texts as well. The tendency of contemporary critics and scholars to read modern poetry, and especially women's poetry, as autobiographical, documenting he-she relationships, combined with their ignorance of mystical traditions, sometimes caused a reductive reading which disregarded the mystical level of such poems.

Much has been written about the central place of love and sex in Jewish mysticism.¹ For our discussion the following should be noted: Kabbalists and Hassidic masters were concerned not with delivering their own personal impressions of their erotic and sexual experiences, but with guiding and structuring religious practices and the modes of understanding these practices. That is why in Jewish mysticism the writer's individual feelings were marginalized or almost completely suppressed.²

In Kabbalah the mystical process of redemptive unity is not supposed to take place between the human and the divine only. The world of God is a mythical complex of masculine and feminine powers which long for unity. Redemptive unity is a process which potentially takes place in heaven, between masculine and feminine divine powers (the *sephirot*), a supernal dy-

1 Most recent is Idel, *Kabbalah and Eros*. See also his *Abulafia*, pp. 129-161; idem, "Sexual metaphors"; Liebes, "Zohar and Eros," Helner-Eshed, *A River*, pp. 255-267; Green, *The Shekhina*; Biale, *Eros and the Jews*, pp. 101-121.

2 Idel, *Kabbalah and Eros*, pp. 213-214.

namic structure whose details are often articulated in sexual terms. Jewish mysticism incessantly deals with this supernal cosmo-erotic process, rather than with personal human erotic experiences.

Acts of human love and sexual intercourse are conceived as isomorphic to the divine process of unity: the supernal world is reflected by the human one. Thus human love and sex are important because they have noetic and even magic powers; they are directed to help the higher *yihud* (unity) or the process of divine emanation. Human erotic and sexual activity is important in inducing the erotic encounter which causes the descent of the influx from *Keter*, the first *sephira*. Kabbalah and Hassidism elevated the corporeal and sexual level to the status of a ritual having mystical overtones. The ritualization of sexual life conferred an aura of sanctity and religious importance on conjugal relationships as long as they served religious and national goals. Kabbalah and Hassidism encouraged love and sex within matrimonial life, mainly for procreation. Only in Sabbateanism and Frankism did free sex and transgressive sexuality become a *via mystica*.³

Traditional Jewish mystical experiences have produced more or less detailed, concrete and audacious descriptions of the beloved God and the mystic's feelings of love to Him not only as a powerful metaphor of spiritual delight but also as a means of cosmic redemption. Kissing and coupling are metaphors for mystical experience in the *Zohar* and in later texts.⁴ The theological audacity of such metaphors, one can imagine, were among the reasons for the harsh Rabbinic criticism of Kabbalah and Hassidism. Secular modern Hebrew poets used such metaphors without theological restrictions, although metaphors of bare corporeal relationship with divine sacredness were rare until the end of the 20th century.

In modern Hebrew poetry, mystical experiences are often described as a personal erotic or sexual event, which has a noetic value and entails a cosmic process. The aim of these texts is neither to shape the readers' religious life nor to instruct the mystics how to redeem the universe. It also does not aim at improving or elevating the reader's sex life. It is simply an expression of strong

3 Liebes, *The Secret of Sabbatean Belief*, pp. 145-146.

4 Helner-Esehnd, *A River*, pp. 352-357.

feelings and emotional events which the poet wishes to share with his reader by using the art of words.

These events range from delicate kiss to transgressive sex. Kissing—not necessarily between man and woman— is a mildly erotic metaphor of mystical experience in many Hebrew and Israeli poems written by men. In Bialik's long poem "Zohar," for example, the child's play with the zephyrs reaches its climax when he feels that he is kissed by "thousands of kisses/ of thousands of rays/ too sweet to contain/ too big to bear."⁵ In Gilboa's poem "*Bekitso Lemereishito*"⁶ the lighted noon sky kisses the oppressing bush in a moment of "divine transformation." Pinhas Sadeh describes how, lying on the grass, he is kissed by the loving wind, which is also a sacred spirit. The wind "is whispering that she loves me (...) her mouth on my mouth will kiss me/ and in her kiss will die/ hell, which was the world."⁷ In his poem "For I am Coming,"⁸ the poet is standing in front of the sea on a starry night, speaking words of love and devotion to the sea: "Your white waves are kissing my feet,/ kissing my eyes, kissing my lips (...) into your blue the look of my blue eyes is diving.// Do you want me to come into you completely?" The sea is here a terrestrial manifestation of a human-divine masculine being, which is powerful, adorable and beautiful, at the same time seductive and loving, intoxicating and killing. The unity is based on a feeling of identity between the poet and the sea: "You are the great, you are the beautiful, will you not understand [me] the big and the beautiful?" Yair Hurvitz in his "In a Fan-Like Canopy,"⁹ describes sacredness as a deck of cards which opens into a colorful rainbow, its folds hiding a kiss.

Delicate metaphors of mystical love, avoiding sexual details, are characteristic of poems in which ideal love is united with yearnings for heavenly sacredness, and in which the idealization of human love cannot be disconnected from eroticization of religious experience. They can be found, for example, in the love poems of Pinhas Sadeh and Yair Hurvitz. In Hurvitz's "To My Love,

5 Bialik, *Poems 1899-1934*, p. 92.

6 Gilboa, *Poems*, vol. 2m p. 176.

7 Sadeh, *Poems*, p. 141.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 76.

9 Hurvitz, *The Fate of the Garden*, p. 143.

When It Awakens,”¹⁰ the poet implores for the return of love, which was “veiled with angels’ faces (...) resting on islands and light/ of flowers opening eyes walking, in delicacy rowing/ on seas, disappearing.” This is a heavenly love, flooded with heavenly light and covered with beautiful delicate flowers, love whose existence is reserved in a hidden place.

In contrast to these delicate descriptions of mystical unity as a kiss, one can also find more daring descriptions of various degrees of sexual contact. The comparison of a powerful sexual desire with a yearning for mystical unity has been discussed above in Bialik’s “The Scroll of Fire” and “Where Are You?” (both written in 1905). Unexpectedly, it was Zelda in her poem “A Banquet”¹¹ who wrote about the physical meeting of man and wife (without describing it in detail) as a legendary-mystical experience like a cosmic marriage banquet. Pinhas Sadeh described the spiritual unity which was created during the physical act of love: “She was lying in my lap. A Being of light. White beauty, which cannot be described by words (...) Sacred earth. Sacred beauty. Light.”¹²

Dalia Rabikovich in her “Delight”¹³ described feminine orgasm as a cosmic experience of mutual flowing, gushing forth and swallowing, in a picture of revelation full of light, gold and circular movements, thus mixing traditional mystical symbols with realistic impressions. In this poem ecstasy begins with the heightening of tree branches and continues with the appearance of heavenly light, which becomes a river encircling and flooding the world: “And the light went around flooding like a river.” The words “and the wheel of the eye desired the wheel of the sun” describes the relationship between the human and the divine as two circles which resemble the Kabbalistic *sephiroth*. The difference between the superior and inferior levels of being is eliminated, while the light touches the lowest bushes and plants. The supernal world is melting and mixing in the terrestrial world, while the light melts like hot iron in the waves of the river and “ignites” the river’s wavelets. The small, almost invisible movements of the wavelets transform the light into fire. The poet is swallowed by the sun as if she was an orange. This swallowing sweeps the entirety of na-

10 Ibid., p. 49.

11 Zelda, *Poems*, p. 51.

12 Sadeh, *I Sing Like a Bird*, p. 6.

13 Rabikovich, *Poems*, p. 47.

ture in a desire of swallowing. The yellow river roses also open their mouths wide to swallow the wavelets. The river roses allude to Ophelia's suicide in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Here the roses are not white, the symbol of purity, and not red, which also sometimes serves as symbol of sacredness, but yellow, like the orange and the poet's head, because the yellow here represents the pleasure of the senses, the feeling of ripeness, while gold is here a symbol of sacredness, alluding to the golden pomegranates in the Tabernacle (Exodus 28:34). The hypnotic power of the mutual swallowing experience is expressed by the sounds as well: the rhyme OA which is kept throughout the poem, alternately exchanging with the rhyme AT, form a wave of sound, expressing the opening and closing of the mouth and other parts of the body.

The most daringly sexual mystical Israeli poems were written by Haya Esther (born in 1941). In spite of her religious background, Haya Esther, who is a prolific prose writer and children's writer, painter and sculptor, wrote long poems which provocatively describe the sexual act and the woman's excited organs in metaphors and rhetoric characteristic of mystical poetry. Her poems demand from the reader an attitude of respect and admiration for sex as a mythological, divine event.

Daring erotic descriptions of the mystical experience are characteristic of Binyamin Shvili's poems as well. In his poem "With Ibn Arabi's Lines"¹⁴ the knowledge of God is compared to a man's physical touch with a woman's trembling vagina while coupling: "Man knows God only/ because/ God wishes to know Himself/ Like I knew the heart beatings /of my beloved's burning vagina." As the citation shows, the audacity is not only erotic but also theological: it is God who wants to know Himself when he is in contact with man. In the poem "I Saw Two Struggling with Flagella,"¹⁵ Shvili goes even further in sexual metaphors for ecstatic unity. Here the sexual act is mixed with a description of two lovers who flagellate each other unto death by iron flagella. The poet is swept away by the sado-masochistic drive, and by satisfying such needs he is transformed from man to God: "On the slaughtered body I shall drop lie be castrated/ in order to grow to be God."

14 Shvili, *Poems of Nostalgia to Mecca*, p. 48.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 7

Already Mordechai Georgo Langer in his poem “*Hagvura She-be-tif’eret*” (The Might of Glory, alluding to names of the upper Kabbalistic *sephirot*), first printed in 1929,¹⁶ described a homosexual love as a mystical unity. The poem opens with a description of the powerful emotional influence which the meeting with the lover has on the poet. Later, the beauty of the lover’s body is described and the influence of desire on the poet is compared to fire in the poet’s garden. Unexpectedly, it is the lover’s smile which causes the poet sadness and pain. This is the pain of desire, which drives the poet into action: “Over the chasm of dark death my senses then erupt/ and to it my blood’s potency then desires to enter.” This is undoubtedly a homosexual erotic poem, but with its title the poet, an observant Hassidic Jew, directed the reader to the idea that the sexual experience causes — at least metaphorically — a union of the two heavenly *sephirot*, *gvura* and *tiferet*. Later in this poem, the lover’s body (or maybe his sex organ) is compared to the *sephira hod* (according to its traditional symbolism in the Zohar).

Aryeh Ludwig Strauss wrote, together with a mystical love poem in which the woman is sacred and divine,¹⁷ a mystical-homosexual poem, titled “The Secret of Love”¹⁸ and subtitled “After a Motif from the Syrian Odes to Solomon.” This well-constructed quartet is written in the style of Middle-Ages Hebrew poetry, which was influenced by Arabic poetry in which love between men was a frequent theme. It is not clear whether this poem expresses the poet’s homosexual inclinations or is an imitation exercise.

Shvili also described mystical feelings which arise in him together with homosexual drives. In a well-rhymed poem, Shvili described himself lying on his bed thinking about his friend who is in love: “asking about his God and mine/ who hides his face I pain I drag my blanket/ and on my bed I imagine that I lie on my God.”¹⁹ The beautiful rhymes of this poem contribute to the impression that the poet is losing his consciousness and is totally swept up in his imagination. Even more daringly, Shvili described a coupling with his dead brother, who appeared in his dream looking like an angel in white dress, “his

16 Langer, *Poems*, p. 25

17 Strauss, *Hours and Generation*, p. 51

18 *Ibid.*, p. 55.

19 Shvili, *Poems of the Great Tourist*, p. 47.

legs like milk” and the whole lower part of the body is feminine.²⁰ In another poem God resembles a matron and the poet is her maiden-slave, with whom she has lesbian relations.²¹ Excellent Israeli homosexual mystical poetry was written also by Ilan Sheinfeld and Gavriella Elisha.

The Riddle of the Sacred Woman

The opposition of genders between the mystic and God has produced feminine images of the male mystic. In modern Hebrew poetry written by men, one can also often find the feminine role of the poet in poems which describe erotic relationships with God or with other sacred beings. Gilboa’s “Birth” is a clear example (See ch. 1). The opposition of genders between different powers in the supernal world has produced a Jewish feminine image of God — the *Shekhina* is the clearest example of a feminine *sephira*. These traditions were probably created through dialectical relationships with other religions.

The feminine image of the sacred in modern Hebrew literature is based on both Jewish and European literary traditions. One of Sadeh’s poems quotes Yaakov Frank’s words, “You should know that the anxiety of the Jews stems from their belief in a male Messiah./ and the Christians are safe because of their belief in a maiden Messiah/ for She is the real Messiah. She is the guide and the redeemer.”²² In fact, while in European Romantic and Symbolist poetry the divine feminine image is an independent symbol of sacredness with an independent redeeming power, the feminine *Shekhina* in Jewish mysticism cannot be considered an independent redeeming power.

Interpreting poems in which the image of the woman is a mystical symbol, Israeli scholars who were not sensitive to the mystical level of the text understood them to be autobiographical, and therefore found them very difficult to understand. The image of the woman in Alterman’s poetry is perhaps the most interesting example of this error.

20 Shvili, *A Child with a Kite*, pp. 42-43.

21 Shvili, *Poems of Nostalgia to Mecca*, p. 32.

22 Sadeh, *Poems*, p. 170.

Much was written by critics and scholars about the “riddle of the Altermanian addressee,”²³ which seemed insoluble. “The hermeneutic problems posed by the image of the Altermanian woman lead to a dead end,” wrote Aharon Komem.²⁴ The women in Alterman’s “Stars Outside,” and even more so in “The Joy of the Poor,” embarrassed their interpreters, who tried to understand their characteristics and the attitude of the poet toward them as documentations of realistic love between man and woman.²⁵ Efforts to understand the relationships between the man and the woman in “The Joy of the Poor” as representative of reality — whether from a political²⁶ or from a biographical-psychological point of view²⁷ — seemed insufficient and were reconsidered, sometimes by the scholars themselves. Thus Dan Miron, a dominant scholar of Alterman’s early poetry, in his first articles on Alterman attacked the current tendency to understand the relationships between the man and the woman in his poetry, especially in “The Joy of the Poor,” as a representation of Jewish historical reality.²⁸ Miron also polemized with Baruch Kurzweil, who interpreted Alterman’s poetry as an expression of the modern *condition humaine*.²⁹ Miron demanded at first that one reads “Stars Outside” and “The Joy of the Poor” as Romantic personal love poetry, simultaneously expressing both “the truths of Alterman’s deep and struggling world” and “a vital eternal human truth,”³⁰ without any connection to historical or political themes. In his later writings on Alterman, he found in “Stars Outside” not only Romantic expressions of personal experiences but also “a sort of religious-ritual didactics,” which did not fit in with Romantic poetics.³¹ About twenty years after the publication of his first articles on

23 Shamir, *The Vagrant Bard*, p. 82.

24 Komem, “Alterman,” p. 35.

25 Baumgarten, “History of Alterman’s Scholarship,” pp. 8-9.

26 Katsenelson, “Alterman.”

27 Miron, *Four Faces*.

28 *Ibid.*, pp. 13-53. The current tendency which Miron attacked was shared by Tsurit, “The Joy of the Poor”; Kena’ani, “The Joy of the Poor”; Ring, “The Joy of the Poor”; Shveid, “Alterman.”

29 Kurzweil, “Alterman.”

30 Miron, *Four Faces*, p. 100. See also Golomb, “Alterman,” p. 58. Golomb wrote that the father and the maiden in “The Joy of the Poor” are “representatives of the human spirit.”

31 Miron, “On Three Road Poems,” pp. 168, 186.

Alterman, Miron invalidated the Romantic interpretation of Alterman's poetics and emphasized the neo-Classical character of the poetry. At this stage Miron came to the conclusion that the heroes of Alterman's poetry "do not reflect 'a life story' based on autobiographical experiences."³²

The thinness of the realistic impression in Alterman's poetry in general and in the relations between man and woman in particular also raised criticism regarding the artistic value of his poetry, especially among readers for whom tangibility and concreteness were important criteria for artistic value. Nathan Zach protested against the theatricality of Alterman's fictional world and commented that he "lived in a world of abstractions."³³ Yosef Ha-Efrati also criticized the lack of concreteness in Alterman's "Stars Outside,"³⁴ and Israel Levin criticized the lack of realistic impression when the poem represents "complex social phenomenon by one simplistic abstract concept." Levin complained that "The Joy of the Poor" created an impression of vagueness, indefiniteness and "thinness of the real impression."³⁵ Miron also wrote on "the failure of the poem ["Avenues in the Rain"] in bringing the situation to its concreteness," but justified it by pointing out Alterman's direction of the reader to a more complex psychological reality and his affinity to the neo-Classical tradition.³⁶

Alterman was also attacked by scholars and critics who condemned his attitude to the woman on a moral level: Kurzweil blamed Alterman for an insane divinization of love and Eros, and also an alienated, merely physical treatment of the woman.³⁷ Zach argued that Alterman in his poetry treated the woman with naïve Romanticist irresponsibility, giving her "a light unbinding caress," but being unable to have a real permanent relationship with her.³⁸ Lily Ratok found that Alterman's view of woman is stereotypical, chauvinistic and misogynistic.³⁹

32 Miron, *From the Particular*, p. 58.

33 Zach, "Reflections on Alterman's Poetry"; idem, *Air Lines*, p. 49.

34 Ha-Efrati, "Alterman."

35 Levin, "Alterman," p. 189.

36 Miron, *Four Faces*, pp. 96-97.

37 Kurzweil, "Alterman."

38 Zach, *Air Lines*, p. 50.

39 Ratok, "Alterman."

The effort to understand Alterman's poetry against the background of European traditions and models led Baruch Kurzweil to the conclusion that the woman in his poetry resembles women in "European macabre poetry." This genre was presented by Mario Praz in his book *The Romantic Agony* (1933), which deals with connections between European Romanticism and late 19th century Decadence, Symbolism and Neo-Romanticism.

It was only natural to examine the Russian context of Alterman's poetry, for although Hebrew was his mother (or to be more exact, father) language in terms of both reading and speaking, he spoke Russian with his mother for her whole life.⁴⁰ In Alterman's library resided many Russian books, including the Symbolist poetry of Bryusov, Blok and Esenin.⁴¹ At the beginning of his literary career, when he was a student in Nancy, he became acquainted with French literature. Returning to Eretz-Israel at the age of 24, Alterman was confronted with Shlonsky's hegemony and his admiration of Blok. This was probably when Russian Symbolism, which was already planted in Hebrew poetry by Bialik, became a source of influence for Alterman as well.

Dan Miron in his 1959 article on Alterman was the first to mention the influence of "the 'Symbolist' [with quotation marks] movement" on Alterman's poetry. The efforts to understand the non-realistic aspect of Alterman's poetry and to recognize its affinity to European literature grew after the publication of Alterman's previously unpublished early poetry. Avraham Balaban found that until 1934 Alterman's poems presented realistic situations, while in later poems there are no real-life situations.⁴² Comparing Alterman's early poetry with his "Stars Outside," Kartun-Bloom came to the same conclusion about the symbolic "abstract" character of Alterman's woman.⁴³ In contrast to Balaban, who defined Alterman's poetry as a Romance, Kartun-Bloom found traces of French Symbolism (especially the work of Baudelaire) in Alterman's early poetic prose. Later Dror Eidar examined in detail Baudelaire's influence on "Stars Outside,"⁴⁴ while Arpali and Shamir stationed Alterman in the context

40 Dorman, "Alterman," p. 155.

41 Rosenberg, "Alterman's Library," p. 172.

42 Balaban, "Alterman," pp. 34-35.

43 Kartun-Bloom, "A First and a Second Smile," p. 37.

44 Eidar, *Alterman- Baudelaire*.

of Modernism.⁴⁵ Shamir pointed out that in Alterman's poetic essays there is a clear affiliation with Russian Symbolist ideas, but concluded that the style of the poems themselves is close to Futurism.⁴⁶ In "Stars Outside" Shamir found a synthesis among Symbolism, Futurism and Expressionism. In her analysis of the poems she again briefly mentioned Alterman's contact with the tradition of Blok's Beautiful Lady.⁴⁷

"Stars Outside" was read in the contexts of both European poetry, and Jewish and Christian mysticism.⁴⁸ Jewish mystical sources and Jewish-Christian apocalyptic backgrounds were found in "The Joy of the Poor."⁴⁹ Schweid found that the woman in the last poem of the cycle "Plague Poems" is an image whose sources can be found in Jewish-Christian and Gnostic myths of redemption.⁵⁰

Given the many interpretations of and arguments regarding Alterman's woman, I propose that Russian Sophiology can be an important clue to understanding her purpose.

The Myth of Sophia in Gnosticism, Judaism and Christianity

At the center of the Sophia (Greek: wisdom) myth there is a feminine image, the wisdom of God who intermediates between God and the world. Her role is to create the world and to redeem humanity. The traces of this myth can be found in the TANACH, in the Apocrypha, in early Christianity, in Hellenistic Gnosticism, in Jewish and Christian Kabbalah and in later Orthodox Christianity. The Sophia myth according to which Wisdom, God's daughter, took part in the creation of the world has its sources in ancient Jewish traditions.⁵¹ It can be traced in Job 28:21-28, where Wisdom is

45 Arpali, *Alterman*; Shamir, *Alterman*.

46 Shamir, *ibid.*, pp. 211-219.

47 *Ibid.*, pp. 154, 216, 253.

48 Zimmerman, *Alterman*; Keidar, "Alterman."

49 Nathan, "Alterman"; Levin, "Alterman"; Shalev, "Alterman's 'The Joy of the Poor.'"

50 Shweid, "Alterman."

51 Macrae, "The Jewish Background."

described as a mysterious image whom only God saw during the creation of the world, and also in Proverbs, ch. 8, where Wisdom appears as a dominating and guiding divine power, created before the creation of the world, when she was God's "daughter of amusements," playing with the world and with human beings.⁵²

The mythological narrative about Wisdom is theologically more daring in the apocrypha. In "The Wisdom of Ben-Sira" and in "The Wisdom of Solomon," Wisdom is described as God's bride and mate.⁵³ The Jewish-Hellenistic Gnostic version of the Sophia narrative can be found in the writings of Philo, according to which God the Father "knew" Sophia, and she gave birth to the son-world.⁵⁴ Philo's Sophia is simultaneously a sacred spirit, *anima mundi* (the world's soul), and the Pythagorean Logos. She gives birth, breast-feeds, reigns, legislates, punishes and repairs. Philo wrote that "she is feminine by name but masculine by nature,"⁵⁵ and also that she is both daughter and mother, permanently renovating the secret of her virginity. These sources strengthen the hypothesis that Hellenistic Gnosticism used Jewish sources.⁵⁶

In Gnostic texts written in the Hellenistic space, Sophia is variously described as hero of the world's creation and as a personification of divine Wisdom, God's spirit, hypostasis or sphere.⁵⁷ In these narratives there are echoes of ideas which were philosophically formulated in the writings of Pythagoras, Plato and Plutarch about the place of Wisdom in the creation of the world and the nature of the human soul. Also connected are Mediterranean pagan traditions of goddesses (Ashtoreth, Anat, Isis); stories about family relations between gods and goddesses; stories about sins, wanderings and sufferings, such as those of Helene, Lucius and Apoleus; Hellenistic stories about love and crime, and even real-life stories of Roman courtesans.⁵⁸

52 Scholem, *Kabbala*, pp. 259-260.

53 Patai, *The Hebrew Goddess*, p. 139; Scholem, *Kabbala*, pp. 261-262.

54 Philo, *On the Creation*, pp. 29-30; Scholem, *Kabbala*, pp. 261-262.

55 Philo, *Ibid.*, p. 262.

56 Macrae, "The Jewish Background."

57 Stead, "The Valentinian Myth"; Mortley, *Womanhood*; King, *Images of the Feminine*.

58 King, *ibid.*, pp. 63, 89, 93.

The Valentinian, one of the Gnostic versions of the Sophia story,⁵⁹ begins with the ideal pre-mundane situation, with Sophia in complete unity with God, as a beloved daughter is with her father. But Sophia sins: she wishes to be separate from her father, to compete with him and to give birth to the world, and therefore she sets off to wander in the nether world. Her surrender to her desire reduces her wisdom, and she becomes prey to lovers, the representatives of the material and corporeal world. They rape and exploit her, and even try to blind her eyes, the symbols of her wisdom. From these relationships monstrous, blind and sick creatures are born, the first of which is Demiurge, who creates our world. Sophia wanders and suffers, repents her sins, and at last is redeemed by her lover (other versions: her brother), Jesus' herald (other version: Jesus himself "came down on her like a hawk"). At this stage she reunites with the heavenly world and becomes "the world's soul," a spiritual power which is able to redeem man and bring his spirit into contact with God. The redemption of humanity will take place when Sophia and God will be married, thus settling the tension between the worlds and also between femininity and masculinity. This heavenly marriage is the ideal model for human marriage and life in general.

Duality and paradox characterize the image of Gnostic Sophia: she is both a sinner and a creator-redeemer, she is both a virgin and a whore, she gives birth and causes catastrophes. Psychoanalytical interpretation of religions found great interest in this duality of mercy and cruelty, which according to this point of view is a projection of male fantasies and fears.⁶⁰ Feminist anthropologists wrote harsh criticism against the myth of woman as an ideal, redeeming and consoling image on the one hand, and as a dangerous demonic creature on the other.⁶¹ And in fact, from a feminist point of view this story might give a misogynistic impression, both because it attributes to woman disgraceful sexual drives and because it expects an ideal redeeming woman on earth. However, from the same point of view one can also find in this story an appreciation of woman's wisdom, spirituality and creative independence, for, after all, Sophia

59 Robinson, *The Nag Hamadi Library*, pp. 190-198.

60 Patai, *The Hebrew Goddess*, pp. 6-17, 153.

61 Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, vol. 2 pp. 429-455.

is a feminine, creative, redemptive God, counterbalancing masculine Gods in monotheistic religions.⁶²

The Sophia myth continued to develop in Christianity. In the New Testament, Sophia is sometimes identified with Jesus himself,⁶³ and in early Christianity “Sophia” was an attribute of Jesus, pushed to the periphery by the struggle of Christianity with Gnosticism. The Arius polemic (256-336) raised again the need for Sophia as a mediatory concept between Jesus as God and Jesus as human being.⁶⁴ In Byzantine Christianity, *Hagia* (sacred) Sophia became the Caesar’s personal patron, a glorious church was built for her in Istanbul, and her image became mixed with Maria, Jesus’ mother.⁶⁵ French and Italian Middle-Ages literature continued to develop the symbolic image of the divine woman.⁶⁶ In Russian Orthodox Christianity the importance of Sophia grew further: until the late 17th century the Sophia *pre-mudrost’* (God’s wisdom) was central in the folk popular cult. Churches were built for her in Kiev, Novgorod, Polotsk, Volograd, Tobolsk and Arkhangelsk, where she plays the role of God’s mother. In Russian Christianity, Sophia sometimes exchanges with Maria in celebrating events from Jesus’ life.⁶⁷ The epithet “Sophia” belonged to characters from the Christian folklore and to Russian women saints. Sophia even became a national sacred mother and a symbol of “Mother-Russia,” the sacred Russian spirit.⁶⁸ Beginning in the 18th century, when the Russian Christian establishment turned to the West, the Sophia cult weakened, but it was continued among circles influenced by Christian Kabbalah (particularly from Yakov Böhme) and among Russian Free Masons.

In the Talmudic literature one can find *Knesset* (gathering, togetherness) *Israel* as a mystic personification of the Jewish people or the Torah. Like Sophia, *Knesset Israel* is described as a matron and as a bride of God. This allegorical

62 Meehan, *Delighting in the Feminine*; idem, “Vladimir Solov’ev’s Sophiology.”

63 Schussler-Fiorenze, *Jesus, Miriam’s Child*.

64 Newman, “The Pilgrimage of Christ-Sophia.”

65 Meyendorf, “The Iconography of Divine Wisdom.”

66 Lazar, “Cupide”; John, “The Lady as Symbolical Figure.”

67 Bulgakov, *Sophia the Wisdom of God*.

68 Hubbs, *Mother Russia*.

image was inherited by Christianity, in which it represents the Church.⁶⁹ In the Talmud and in the *Heikhalot* literature, the term *Shekhina* is synonymous with *ha-kavod ha-elo'hi*, signifying the presence of God in the world, not an independent divine being.

Gershom Scholem wrote that during the Middle Ages Jewish philosophers began to use the word “*Shekhina*” to signify a divine being which mediates between God and the world, similar to the Gnostic Sophia. For them it was an emanation of God’s logos. The characterization of the *Shekhina* as a mother, bride and daughter is an innovation of the Kabbalah, and can be traced to the first Kabbalist book, *Bahir* (Provence, 1180). Later in the *Zohar* the *Shekhina* was more daringly characterized by sexual symbols.⁷⁰ Scholem believed that the Gnostic Sophia myth somehow became known by Jewish mystical circles, and thus the Gnostic “Virgin of Light” was transformed into the *sephira Shekhina*. In the *Bahir* she is also “soul” and “princess” while God and *Knesset Israel* are a King and his daughter or wife.⁷¹ A Jewish development of the Gnostic Sophiology together with Neoplatonic ideas can be found in Yehuda Abravanel’s *Dialoghi d’Amore* (Dialogues on Love, Rome 1535), a popular and influential book (it was translated from Italian into French, Spanish and Latin and influenced Spinoza, among others) which deals with the power of spiritual love.⁷²

It is now accepted that one can see in the mythical elements of Kabbalah an ancient Jewish heritage. In fact, there is a clear similarity between Sophia and the *Shekhina*, not only because both are intermediary feminine divine images, but also because they have a dual, paradoxical character: The *Shekhina* in ancient Jewish mysticism pities and consoles, but also punishes and kills. In Kabbalah the *Shekhina*, who generally represents the positive feminine aspect of the *sephirot* system, is also “the tree of death to her son” and the mother of Naama and Lilith, feminine evil powers.

In spite of these similarities, Sophia and the *Shekhina* differ. First, Sophia is an independent divine being, while the *Shekhina* is the tenth, lowest *sephira*, with whom a Jew can achieve contact. (The higher *sephira*, Wisdom, is the sec-

69 Scholem, *Kabbala*, p. 263.

70 Ibid., pp. 276-286.

71 Scholem, *The Beginning of Kabbala*, pp. 33-34.

72 Klauzner, “Abravanel and the Philosophy of Love.”

ond after *Keter*.) Second, Sophia redeems the individual, while the separation and the redemption of the *Shekhina* have national meaning. Third, Sophia will redeem humanity after she is herself redeemed by a divine male figure, while in Jewish mysticism the mystic who achieves unity with the *Shekhina* encourages the unity of the *sephirot* system and thus brings about redemption to the world. Fourth, Sophia represents spiritual love, while unity with the *Shekhina* can be achieved through marriage and coupling with one's wife.⁷³ Jewish mysticism attributes spiritual sacredness to the sexual contact of a married couple. Fifth, Sophia is a concrete icon and a first name in Orthodox Christianity, while the Jewish symbol of the *Shekhina* is more abstract. These differences can be helpful when trying to detect the sources of influence on modern Hebrew poetry.

Sophiology in the Writings of Vladimir Soloviev and Alexandr Blok

Sophiology — the mystical cult of Sophia and the incessant poetical and theoretical engagement with the versions of her mythical narrative — is one of the central elements of Russian Symbolist poetry, which flowered during the first decade of the 20th century. It is also one of the differences between Russian and West-European Symbolism.⁷⁴ Russian Symbolists, particularly Alexandr Blok, Andrey Biely and Viacheslav Ivanov, viewed the artist as a “prophet,” a spiritual leader whose life is a prolonged crusade for the liberation of the world from evil. The poet should sacrifice his life for Sophia, the feminine symbol of sacred redemption, as a knight would for his lady. This world view was deeply influenced by the teaching of Vladimir Soloviev.

Soloviev regarded the return to the ancient Russian spirit as a moral purification of the Russian soul from modern Western influences. He proposed a modern system of philosophical-mystical concepts as a basis for a new way of life and social-national organization of contemporary Russian. Soloviev's term “Sophia,” which appears in his early writings, especially in “La Sophie”

73 Tishbi, *Zohar* vol. 2, p. 609, 610.

74 Pyman, *History of Russian Symbolism*, pp. 226-242; Groberg, “The Feminine Cult of Sophia.”

(in French, 1875-1876), “Lectures on Godmanhood” (1878-1881) and “The Meaning of Love” (1892-1894), is based on a combination of ideas from German Idealism, Gnostic sources (including later German and English Gnostics), Dante and the Italian Troubadours’ poetry, the Bible (he read the *TANACH* in the original with the help of his Jewish friend, Feivl Gets, who taught him Hebrew for twenty years), and the *Zohar*, which he had read at the age of 22 in Knorr von Rosenroth’s Latin translation under the title *Kabbalah Denudata* (Kabbalah Unveiled, 1677-1678).

Soloviev’s philosophical-mystical writings show the clear influence of Jewish and Christian Kabbalah.⁷⁵ He used the Hebrew mystical terms *khokhma* (Wisdom, as a heavenly being) and *Ein-sof* (Infinity, the divine source). He called Sophia *sof-ya* (the end of God), *reishit* (beginning) and *malkhut* (Kingdom, the name of the seventh *sephira* in the *Zohar*). According to Soloviev, Sophia is the divine wisdom which is reflected in the “soul of the world,” in nature, in human love and wisdom, and unification with her redeems man from his egoism and enables him to unite with the world, with nature, with society and with his beloved. The important place of nature and society in Soloviev’s teaching is a sign of the influence of contemporary thought.

Soloviev was nicknamed “a monk-knight,” because he declared his readiness to sacrifice himself for the war against evil, in the way the knights of the Middle Ages devoted themselves to the honor of their ladies. In corporeal love he saw a stage and an opportunity for mystical experience, a realization of the heavenly syzygy. He argued that sexual love reveals the means by which man can overcome his natural egoism and become a “Godman.” Sophia represents both the return to national religious roots and to tolerant universalism, for she is a unified Church and perfect humanity.

In his poems Soloviev described his meetings with Sophia, his yearnings for her and his hope that his earthly desire will be transformed into heavenly love. In Soloviev’s poems Sophia is pictured as a beautiful, divine woman, wrapped in light. She is a queen, an empress, a goddess, an angel; having dangerous, sweeping and enslaving powers, she is authoritative and adorable. In these

75 On the influence of Jewish Kabbalah on Soloviev see Kornblatt, “Soloviev’s Androgynous Sophia”; idem, “Russian Religious Thought.” On the influence of Christian Kabbalah on Soloviev see Burmistrov, “Kabbala in Russian Philosophy.”

poems she is characterized as a dream-like, vague image, which appears like a shadow, echo, or reflection in water, encircled with mysterious super-human atmosphere, against the background of shadows, clouds and mist during sunset, evening or night. This background contributes to the vagueness of space and time: "Not here, nor there, near and far,/ in a mystical kingdom of reveries,/ in a tearless and laughless world,/ in a world unseen in life,// There at first, Goddess, in a dark night/ I dreamt you."⁷⁶ She is wrapped with light, her eyes are blue or blue-black, and she has golden curls and a mysterious smile. She appears in silence and is reflected in the water of the lake, a symbol of God's blue-eyed daughter.⁷⁷ This is an image of eternal mysterious femininity, a friend and a goddess. She has a spiritual presence which lightens the poet's soul and with her "bright reflections" gives him moral support and guidance.⁷⁸ He swears to devote himself to her with knightly loyalty. The archetypal symbolic image of Sophia is clearly pictured in Soloviev's early poem "The My Mistress Queen" (1876).⁷⁹ Here she is a Mistress who lives in a palace with seven golden pillars, an allusion to "Wisdom built Her house she hewed seven pillars" (Proverbs, 9:1). In her garden there are lilies and roses, symbols of sacredness in European mysticism and in the Zohar. Her blue eyes (the color of the sky) are sad when she sees her friend (the poet and man in general) struggling with the Minister of Darkness (evil, earthly seductions). She leaves her palace in order to redeem her friend, although his struggle bears witness to his betrayal of his oath of loyalty. In Soloviev's poems Sophia is both a "beloved maiden" and a divine being: she is both virgin and mother, she has both virginal purity and divine motherly mercy and compassion. Purity and evil unite in her: "O how much pure azure/ and black, clack clouds!/ How bright shines on you God's brilliance/ how the fire of evil burns in you and torture."⁸⁰

Soloviev transformed the Gnostic story, wherein Sophia is the suffering heroine who struggles, yearns and is redeemed at last, to a story whose hero is a man, a knight errant who yearns for love, struggles, sacrifices himself and is

76 Soloviev, *Poems, Prose, Letters*, p. 25.

77 See, for example, the poem "Saima," *ibid.*, p. 32

78 *Ibid.*, p. 30.

79 *Ibid.*, p. 19-20.

80 *Ibid.*, p. 32.

redeemed at last. The symbolic cover of Soloviev's ideas combines motifs from Middle-Age Romance, from Pushkin's poetry (such as "There was an Errant Knight," 1829), from the stories of the TANACH, the New Testament and fin-de-siècle European poetry. Thus he founded a spiritual option for his contemporaries, who were ready for a revolution. He proposed a belief in redemption which would not be achieved by radical economic and social changes but by inner enlightenment, conditioned by sacrificial devotion to elevated moral values. "I am the altar, I am also the sacrifice, and I am the priest," he wrote in one of his early poems.⁸¹

In spite of Soloviev's positive attitude to the Jewish religion and to Jews, his teaching and his poetry are marked by a clear Christian and national stamp, and this was what the Russian Symbolists inherited from him. The Sophiology Solovyev worked with was developed further by the poetry and prose of Valerii Briusov, Alexandr Blok, and Andrey Biely; in the essays of Georgii Chulkov, Vasilii Rozanov, Elis (Kobylynsky) and Nikolai Minskii; and in the theological polemics of Pavel Florenskii, Sergei Bulgakov and Nikolay Berdiaev. Here we shall dwell only on Alexandr Blok's Sophiology, because of his status in and influence on both the early 20th century Russian poetry and the pre-state Hebrew poetry.

The affinity between Soloviev's Sophia and the feminine image in Blok's poetry is particularly outstanding in Blok's cycle "Poems on the Beautiful Lady" (1904).⁸² In many of this cycle's poems one can find citations from Soloviev's poems, both as mottoes and within the poetic text, and some of the poetry is dedicated to him. The image of Blok as Soloviev's inheritor became fixed within the Symbolist circle right after the publication of separate poems from this cycle in the journal *Novy Put'* in March 1903.

The Woman in these poems is a divine sacred being who appears to the poet's eyes in the Church or in nature as a vision, perfect and pure, disconnected from everyday reality, of secret beauty, lighting and smiling like a Madonna, consoling and redeeming: "O the sacred, how tender are the candles,/ how much comfort in your traits!/ I do not hear a sigh nor a speech/ but I believe:

81 Ibid., p. 25.

82 Grossman, "Blok, Briusov and the Beautiful Lady."

darling — it is You.”⁸³ Like Soloviev’s Sophia, Blok’s *Prekrasnaia Dama* is an anonymous divine image. She is “the empress of purity,” a mistress closed up in a palace, a castle or a fortress, and the poet is a knight who yearns to penetrate her closed temple, ready to be her bridegroom and her loyal servant. She is an object of adoration and cult not only to the poet himself, but also to “us.” Blok’s Beautiful Lady, like Soloviev’s Sophia, is a vague image. She is pale, silent and static. She is also infinitely sad, cold, distant, sleeping, dreaming. Her only physical traits are her blue eyes, golden hair and sad smile. She appears in a time of dimness, during reddish dusk, night or dawn. She is surrounded by mist, night, and white flowers. She appears in a Church, in lieu of the Madonna, or against a background whose grey-black-white or red colors are symbolic. She twinkles like the Morning Star. She is “the spirit of the world” and “life’s silent key,” and yet she is sometimes a double of death, and the poet knows that he will unite with her only after his own death. She is frozen and motionless. In contrast to her spiritual sacredness, his soul and thoughts resemble the shrieks of birds of prey.

Blok’s Beautiful Lady is less abstract than Soloviev’s Sophia in that she does not bear the mission of redemption for the whole of humanity. In Blok’s poems personal love, which in Soloviev’s writings was a means for the description of the mystical experience, is more central, reflecting the poet’s personal erotic experiences and his attitude to ward real women. The metaphysical atmosphere is here perhaps more a metaphoric expression of the sweeping, astonishing power of real love, and the drive the Beautiful Lady awakens in the poet to devote himself to her, than an expression of a metaphysical vision or a mystical experience. Moreover, the poet often expresses his fear that her vulgar, coarse face will suddenly appear. Blok shared these fears with Andrey Biely in a correspondence they held during 1903-1906. The duality of the ideal-vulgar woman becomes prominent in Blok’s later poetry. In his book *Unexpected Joy* (1907), Blok expressed his refusal of infinite devotion and knightly loyalty for the woman, or for anything which might limit his personal freedom in the name of spiritual purity. The romantic landscape of his early poetry here makes room for decorations of mires, water demons and impure witches, whereas

83 Blok, *Collected Works*, vol. 1. p. 232.

only seldom does the sacred, purple-bluish image of the Beautiful Lady appear for a moment. Here one meets a pagan, sensual woman, who is closer to the earth than to heaven, and sees images of whores and drunken women in inns and taverns. The famous poem *Neznakomka* (The Unknown Lady), which is included in this collection, is a portrait of a woman in whom contrasting traits unite: on the one hand she is sacred and angelic, and on the other hand she is sensual, coquettish, sexual, vulgar and demonic.

Following Blok's crisis of belief in the redemptive woman and the absolute beauty of the spiritual world, in his cycle of poems *Rodina* (Homeland, 1916-1917) he created a Sophia-like woman who represents the spirit of Russia. Here the woman is a princess whom the poet has deserted, but he will return to be her knight and bridegroom. She is a poor, suffering woman whom he loved long ago, and now he carries her cross and stays loyal to her in spite of his betrayals. In the opening poem of this cycle the poet calls out: "O, my *Rus'* [Russia's ancient name]! Wife of mine! Unto pain/ our way clearly continues!"⁸⁴ *Kat'ka*, the heroine of Blok's famous long poem "The Twelve" (1918), is a cruel caricature of Sophia and the Russian spirit. She is a vulgar, silly, cheap and treacherous girl, who arouses aggression in men. In contrast to her, at the end of the poem a mysterious image appears, representing the pure Russian Christianity.

The tension in Blok's poetry between the ideal image of woman and her sensual or puppet-like profile evidences his dual sources: Soloviev's mysticism on the one hand, and the "decadence" characteristic of the first Russian Symbolists on the other.

Sophiology in Bialik's Poetry

Bialik was interested in love and sexuality throughout his literary activity, from "Eve and the Snake" (unpublished, 1891) to "Your Hidden Path" (1928). He was the first modern Hebrew poet whose poetry expressed powerful sexual drives (such as "Her Eyes," "The Hungry Eyes," "Where Are You?" and "The Scroll of Fire"), in contrast to the frivolous Heine-like poems in Y.L. Peretz's *Ha-Ugav* (The Harp, 1894). In all of his poems (except the un-

84 Ibid., vol 3, p. 249.

published “*Noshanot*” and the early “Because of an Apple”) Bialik depicted love not as a passing event, but as a powerful inner happening which molds the male poet’s personality and way of life. His love affair with the Jewish painter and writer Ira Ian (Esther Slepian) can add details to the biographical background on which some of his love poems were written,⁸⁵ but it cannot explain the unique qualities of these poems.

Bialik’s love poems were often directly or indirectly compared to Chernik-hovsky’s, without taking into account Bialik’s wish to express not only his own feelings, but also the unique Jewish psychology as it was known to him. In 1902 Yosef Klausner pointed out the “small corner” of love in Bialik’s poetry and Bialik’s reluctance to accept “a free and immediate discovery of the feelings of love and of happiness with woman.”⁸⁶ In 1912, Yosef Hayim Brenner found in Bialik’s love poems an escape from the realization of the act of love or guilt feelings after it. For him these were signs of a “sick” attitude to love and of “decadence.”⁸⁷ Adi Tsemach and Dan Miron considered Bialik’s repression of sexual drives and instincts to be the main cause of the poet’s anxiety and of the heavenly images of woman in his poems.⁸⁸ These explanations did not take into consideration the influence of Sophiology on Bialik’s concept of love and woman.

In Bialik’s early love poems, written before 1903 — “She Wrote a Small Letter to Me,” “Her Eyes” and “The Hungry Eyes” — bare sexuality arouses anxiety and rejection in the poet. It is, to him, a dangerous, even demonic power, which might spoil his moral purity. (It is helpful to note that Bialik was already married when he wrote these poems.) In his poem “At Twilight” (1902), romantic love, which makes the lovers unite in body and soul, is even more dangerous than bare sexual arousal, because it creates illusions of spirituality, purity and sacredness. In Bialik’s early unpublished poems, safe love is sexless, or (in “*Noshanot*” and “Because of an Apple”) a frivolous, passing event.

In contrast, in his 1903-1905 work an interesting change can be traced: in these poems love — even in its sexual aspects and even outside of marriage —

85 Shamir, *Her Hidden Path*; Tsurit, *Life’s Love*.

86 Klausner, *Bialik and the Poetry of his Life*, pp.55, 69.

87 Brenner, *Complete Works*, vol 3, p. 618.

88 Zemach, *Bialik*, pp. 34-56; Miron, “The History of the Curl”; idem., *Young Bialik*, pp. 244-255.

is a sacred being. This group of poems includes “Daughter of Israel,” “Where Are You?,” “And If the Angel Asks,” “Come Out,” and “Take Me Under Your Wing,” and the long poems “The Lake” and “The Scroll of Fire.” In the majority of these poems the feminine image, or love itself, is a divine being whom the poet asks to appear and bring redemption to him. In these poems the border between love and mystical experience does not exist.

In “Where Are You?” Love is a divine being. The poet calls her “The *Shekhina* of my desires.” He calls upon her to reveal herself, appear, redeem him and rule over his fate. He says that as long as he can still be redeemed she should come out to do so, attributing to her the ability to reveal and redeem. Late in the poem he recalls that when he was lying on his bed she was burning in his heart like “a fiery *ritspa* (piece of floor),” alluding to the consecration of Isaiah to be a prophet (Isaiah 6:6), which made him pure by burning his lips. Love influenced the poet in the same way. Later, the difference between the poet’s yearnings for love and his ecstatic feeling when studying the Talmud is also blurred: “Between the letters of the Talmud (...) I was looking for nothing but you.” The poet is ready to devote himself to her unto death: “Kill me together with my spring.” Similarly, in “The Scroll of Fire,” the hero-poet turns to a naked girl with whom he has fallen in love and calls her “A woman and a daughter of God,” holding “the scepter of happiness in your right hand and the diadem of redemption on your forehead.”⁸⁹ In the poem “Come Out,” the poet calls his beloved to reveal herself like “the grace of God on earth/ on a wing of light.”⁹⁰

What was it that turned the dangerous woman into a daughter of God? Was it only the Ira Ian affair? And if so, why in “And if the Angel Asks” is love a closed gate? These difficulties grow over the course of a few more poems which were written during the same period, in which love or the woman’s image is sacred and redeeming. Thus in “Take Me Under Your Wing,” we find an angelic woman whose lap — a part of the body which bears sexual connotations — is the poet’s only shelter, and who takes the poet under her motherly wing and serves as a protective nest for his prayers and an addressee of his cruel nihilistic confession. Can this woman be Ira Ian? Can we find Ira Ian’s traces also

89 Bialik, *Poems 1899-1834*, p. 229.

90 *Ibid.*, p. 213.

in “The Lake,” in which the redemption of the poet by a legendary princess is woven into the metaphorical level of the story? In this long poem the lake is compared to “a princess of ancient times who was bewitched” and is waiting for “her lover the prince who will redeem her” by finding in her “the delight hidden in her great brilliance”⁹¹ — metaphors which attribute divine dimensions to her. She however grants “a fresh new abundance” to the poet whose heart is “thirsty for a great, sacred mystery (...) waiting for the revelation of a nearby Shekhina or to the revelation of Eliyahu.”⁹²

The difficulty in attributing the change in Bialik’s view of women solely to his meeting with Ira Ian grows further in light of the fact that the first poem in which Bialik described love as sacred was written about three months before he first met her. In “Daughter of Israel,” written before January 22, 1903, (the meeting with Ira Ian was in March) Bialik wrote about love: “And you should know, I swear to you by the stars of God/ that it [love] is a perfect and pure precious stone.” He compared its *zohar* (brilliance) to the brilliance of the Sabbath candles lit by his mother, “a modest light, a sacred light.”⁹³ What was it that transformed love from a demon which defiles the purity of the poet’s soul into a perfect, precious, pure and sacred being?

The answer lies — generally speaking — in the Symbolist direction which Bialik took in the mid-1910s, after his trip to Warsaw,⁹⁴ and — more specifically — in Bialik’s interest in Sophiology. This direction explains the fact that Bialik, who was educated in the *misnagdi* (non-Hassidic) Volozhin *yeshiva*, and who in his first poems included anti-Hassidic satires,⁹⁵ turns in the first decade of the 20th century to Jewish mysticism — not to Hassidism but to Kabbalah. Kabbalistic terms and symbols begin to appear in his poetry as early as 1901, in “Zohar,” and more clearly in “Alone,” “At Twilight” and “My Light Was Not

91 Ibid., p. 206.

92 Ibid., pp. 208-209.

93 Ibid., p. 147.

94 In his memoirs Fichman wrote that when Bialik returned from Warsaw in the summer of 1905 “we used to bathe in the sea and take long walks and discuss Symbolism, whose poets became very famous then. It was evident that Bialik also became interested in this modern poetry.” Fichman, *Bialik’s Poetry*, p. 447.

95 Bialik, *Poems 1891-1898*, p. 95.

Unearned,” which were written in 1902. At the end of 1902 he wrote “Daughter of Israel” in which love is a pure, sacred, redeeming being.

Bialik was very sensitive to the Jewish character of his poetry, and this may be the reason he did not include “Daughter of Israel,” “Where Are You?” and “Come Out” in the 1908 edition of his poems, delaying their publication until the 1933 edition. This fact did not prevent the Jewish-Russian critic Mordechai Ginzburg from arguing (in *Voskhod*, 1910) that there are “unJewish tones” in Bialik’s love poems, because “the idolization of the woman is alien to Judaism. Lilith — the empress of sin and seduction — this yes, but the cult of *Prekrasnaia Dama* is not recognized in Judaism.”⁹⁶ Bialik rejected such criticism, according to which the woman in his poems is reminiscent of the Christian Madonna and her Symbolist transformations. He noted: “In Christianity the word “mother” has various connotations, but this is not so for the Jew.”⁹⁷ Bialik was proud of the Jewish laureate with which he was crowned by Klauzner and others, although it was sometimes heavy and superfluous for him. He considered writing poetry which expressed the Jewish soul his mission in life, and the difference between Judaism and Christianity was for him, as it was for Ahad Ha-Am, unquestionable. Having said that, it should be added that Bialik shared contemporary Jewish ideas about the Jewishness of early Christianity and Jesus as a Jewish “prophet.”⁹⁸ These ideas grew in a cultural climate of mutual interest between Judaism and Christianity and the efforts of intellectuals and artists in Russia and other European countries to blur the differences between the theologies of the two religions.⁹⁹ Soloviev represented this direction from the Russian side.

Bialik, like Ahad Ha-Am, Dubnov, Zeitlin and other contemporary Jewish intellectuals, knew Soloviev’s utopian pro-Jewish ideas and his teachings about Sophia. His connections with Alexandr Gorskii-Gornostaev, a Russian disciple of Soloviev with whom he worked to translate his poems into Russian, further strengthen this argument (see ch. 1).

96 Ginzburg, “Bialik,” p. 32.

97 Bialik. *Speeches*, vol. 2 p. 129.

98 See Bailik’s speech in the Hebrew University on 15 Adar 1933, *Ha-Universita* (June 1973), pp. 18-19. See also Sadan, *Jesus in Zionist Thought*.

99 Bar-Yosef, “Jewish-Christian Relations.”

Bialik's poetry of 1903-1905 presents an image of a woman whose characteristics and relationships with man resemble those of Soloviev's Sophia no less than those of the *Shekhina* and other feminine symbols in Jewish mysticism. What are the differences between the sacredness of woman and love in Bialik's poems and in Jewish sources?

First, in these poems love — without any connection to marriage and birth of children — is a mystical redeeming experience, and even the erotic desire of a married man for another woman has a religious dimension. Jewish mysticism, in contrast, never exempts man from religious law and does not recognize love outside of marriage.

Second, the characteristics of the redeeming woman (especially in "Come Out," "Take Me Under Your Wing" and "The Scroll of Fire") are similar to Sophia's: she is a woman-angel, wrapped in a halo of light; she smiles, she is encircled by white, gold and azure; she has silver eye-lashes, she is a bride and a queen, mysterious and abundant with heavenly grace. Her external appearance is more detailed and specific than the appearance of the *Shekhina* in Jewish mysticism, and her portrait, especially the smile and the halo of light, is reminiscent of the Christian Madonna more than the *Shekhina*. In "The Scroll of Fire" it is the Sophiological traits which blur the difference between Morning Star and "the maiden," who has golden, motherly, sad eyes and is wrapped with light. As was already noted by scholars, the word *alma* (maiden or virgin) by which she is called in this poem, itself has Christian connotations.¹⁰⁰

Third, like Soloviev, Bialik described the woman as the only source of grace and redemption. For Soloviev Sophia is "a queen, daughter of heaven," and for Bialik the lake is "the forest's sacred of sacredness" and the maiden in "The Scroll of Fire" is "daughter of God," the queen of happiness and salvation. In contrast to the Jewish feminine heavenly image, here the woman is not dominated by a higher God or heavenly system. The lake symbolizes the Absolute by keeping its static state and not sharing the movements outside. In "Come Out" the poet binds small crowns to his beloved's head, turning her into a queen or empress. In "The Scroll of Fire," Morning Star is the symbol of true redemption, in contrast to the revengeful and cruel God who destroys

100 Kurzweil, *Bialik and Chernikhovsky*, p. 50; Ratosh, "The 'Alien Love Poetry,'" p. 311. In Russian *Deva* means both a maiden and the Sacred Virgin.

his world when it disappoints Him. The lake is called *bat-malka* (a queen's daughter), not *bat-melech* (princess, literally, a king's daughter), perhaps due to a translation from Yiddish, but this is an impossible idea in Jewish mysticism, which in spite of its daring ideas keeps the absolute superiority of a male divine authority. She is characterized as "modest and secluded from the world," destined to remain a virgin for ever — which is an idea closer to Christianity than to Judaism. Bialik chose the word *breikha* for the lake (in Hebrew *agam*, a word which appears in his "*Ha-Matmid*") probably because he wanted a it to be a feminine being, and also because of the sound similarity between *breikha* and *bracha* (blessing, grace).

Fourth, the hero of "The Lake" and "The Scroll of Fire" is a knight who devotes his life to the redeeming lady. In "The Scroll of Fire" he promises to create "new heaven and new azure" for her, to crown her, to cover her with white flowers and to hover around her like a hawk — all images that can be found in Soloviev's poetry. In "The Lake" the poet is one of a group of knights who protect the she-lake from storms and hope to win her. Such a knightly male figure (which Soloviev inherited from the European Troubadour poetry from the Middle Ages) is alien to Kabbalist symbolism. Even in Rabbi Nahman's stories, where we do find a male wanderer, it is the man's mission to save the woman, not vice versa.

Fifth, in Bialik's poems, like in Soloviev's, nature takes part in the redemption and sometimes changes places with the Woman: her sacredness is reflected in the water of the lake, in the forest, in the white cloud. In Kabbalah and Hassidism, nature does not have such an independent role.

Sixth, in Bialik's poems, like in Soloviev's, the woman is a source of artistic creativity. Bialik wrote to Ira Ian that the lake is "a symbol of the creative spirit."¹⁰¹ In the same context he wrote that the lake is "the open daughter-eye of the forest's Minister, who sees all, reflects all and always remains within her own substance with her mysterious bright dream," thus connecting the lake with Sophia, who is also the mediator between the heavenly worlds and the artistic creation, daughter-eye of the spirit of the world and of nature. Bialik attributed sacredness to the artist's life, in the vein of Symbolism. For him the

101 Ungerfeld, *Bialik*, p. 140.

poet is one of those “chosen by the spirit of God,” who is able to hear God’s voice. In this sense he and the lake are alike: they know what is hidden from all others. In Jewish mysticism not the artist but the Kabbalist *khaver* or the Hassidic *tsadik* has these powers.

Seventh, Gnostic motifs which connect Sophia’s wisdom with her eyes, and which can be found in Soloviev’s poetry (e.g. in his poem “Daydream”) are present in the image of Bialik’s lake. Such is the metaphor which compares her to “the open daughter-eye of the forest’s Minister.” This connection between the divine woman and her knowledge is also hinted at “The Lake” by the frequent repetitions of “I know,” “and who knows,” and “nobody knows.” These repetitions emphasize the contrast between the inner “knowledge” of the lake and the ignorance of the external world. The lake — symbolic of artistic creation — is a reflection of God’s wisdom. Nature is not only a fountain of emotional revival and moral purification, in the vein of Romanticism, but also a cipher or a metaphysical code, which only artists can read. This is an idea cultivated by Symbolism.

Bialik did not completely receive and accept Soloviev’s Sophiology. His reception of Soloviev’s utopia was selective, critical, and wary of ideas that seemed incongruous with the Jewish spirit. Unlike Soloviev (who considered marriage to be the end of true love), Bialik found it difficult to view sexual relations between an unmarried couple as a positive mystical event. This is clear from his poem “Only One Line of Sun” (1901). In “Come Out,” the poet promises the woman that he will put his “spring” in her, and will *anivekh* (make you yield crops) — a theme that Soloviev never mentions. In “Where are You?” the sexual experience is ecstatic and mystical, but the poet’s devotion to the woman might extinguish his “sparkle” of poetic inspiration. In “The Scroll of Fire” the devotion of the hero to his love for the maiden makes him fall into the River of Death.

In contrast to Sophia, the voice of conscience and ethics, the woman in “The Lake” does not represent the redemption of humanity, but the spirit of art, which is indifferent to whatever happens in outside reality. For Bialik the devotion to pure art, or to love, does not advance the redemption of society and humanity. Bialik did not share Soloviev’s belief in a unified redemption for the individual, the nation and humanity through love.

The problem of individual versus collective redemption is the thematic center of “The Scroll of Fire.” Here redemption has three feminine faces: Morning Star, the Maiden and the group of maidens. In spite of their resemblance — each of the three resembles Sophia — the differences between them have fatal results for the hero: the maidens’ eyes twinkle like Morning Star’s, but their twinkle is not permanent and peaceful but short and quick, and it is extinguished right away, a minute before all of the maidens fall into the black water save one. In contrast to the open-eyed Morning Star, who always watches and protects, the girls in the group walk with closed eyes, absorbed in daydreams and illusions. Their faces are frozen masks of *khevlei mashiakh* (the “pangs” of the coming Messiah). In contrast to her “modest sorrow,” they have big smiles. The similarity between Morning Star and the group of maidens is then illusory: she keeps the sacred dying ember, the symbol of Jewish spirit, while they carry out ideas of redemption which grew from Christian inspiration. “The Scroll of Fire” describes the destruction of both the individual and the nation as a result of their blind following of false visions of redemption, including current contemporary neo-mystical visions, according to which it is possible to redeem the nation and humanity by reviving Christian martyrdom or by fanning the flames of apocalyptic beliefs (see ch. 7). In “The Scroll of Fire” Bialik lays bare the inevitable cruel split between the fire of sexual love and the brilliance of the poet’s mission, which, he believed, required a renunciation of personal happiness. Soloviev’s two central ideas — Sophiology and Sobornost’ (sacred togetherness) — are questioned here.

Shlonsky, Blok and the Sacred Woman

Sophiology can also be found in Yiddish and Hebrew poetry which was written in the 1920s. In Aharon Zeitlin’s long poem “Metatron,” (1922) the redeeming Woman is called *Ur-eibig-veisse* (the ancient eternally white one).¹⁰² In 1926, Avraham Shlonsky translated into Hebrew one chapter from Soloviev’s “The Meaning of Love.”¹⁰³ In 1942, he translated two of Soloviev’s poems, “Panmongolism” and “To My Mistress the Queen,” which

102 Zeitlin, *Metatron*, p. 94. See also Bar-Yosef, “Zeitlin and Brenner.”

103 Soloviev, “On Love” trans. Shlonsky.

he chose to print in the opening of *Russian Poetry*, a collection of modern Russian poems in Hebrew translations which he edited together with Leah Goldberg.¹⁰⁴ In the preface to this book Shlonsky introduced Aleksandr Blok, Soloviev's disciple, as "Russia's second love" after Pushkin. For him Blok was "the backbone" of modern Russian poetry.¹⁰⁵ Shlonsky also expressed his admiration for Blok in an essay he wrote in 1926.¹⁰⁶ In this essay Shlonsky wrote that Blok's woman represents the musical beauty and sacredness of the Revolution, which Blok wraps with mystical mist. Here Shlonsky did not mention any type of physical or spiritual love for the woman, nor any traits which were considered feminine, such as compassion, mercy and tenderness. Shlonsky used Jewish mystical terms such as *pshat ve-sod*, *nigun*, and *Shekhina* in order to explain the role of music in Blok's poetry. Shlonsky emphasized, however, that Blok did not have in mind religious sacredness but "the music of the Revolution." He explained that Blok's mystical feelings had been molded by the frightful impressions of his time. According to Shlonsky, in "The Twelve" the figure which appears at the end is not Jesus but "the symbol of the time's changes," "a sign of the great destruction and the beginning of a new culture."

Shlonsky admired Blok, but the divine woman in his poetry represents neither the Bolsheviks nor the Zionist Revolution. She is also different from Sophia: she is not an angel, a lady or a mysterious queen who arouses feelings of erotic or spiritual love in man.

In poems written from 1922 to 1927, Shlonsky distanced himself from the position of worshipping the superiority of the sacred woman. He passed over the divine sacredness to the man-poet, whose consciousness is what makes feminine impressions sacred. The poet often has feminine traits. In the cycle "Crop," the poet declares his surrender to Earth, who will bestow on him "crop and fruit." He puts his head in the earth's lap: "like the head of Desdemona in Othello's lap/ I am in your wild lap."¹⁰⁷

104 Shlonsky and Goldberg, *Russian Poetry*.

105 Ibid., pp. 1-4.

106 Shlonsky, "On Blok"

107 Shlonsky, *Poems* vol. 1 p. 171.

In “Following the Flock,” the poet smells the feminine odors of nights in the Valley of Izraël as God smells a prayer.¹⁰⁸ In his poem “I” he compares himself to the scriptures, to the temple and even to the mother of God.¹⁰⁹ In this poem, the world is the book of Psalms, and he himself is the loftiest psalm: “I am the loftiest hymn in the psalm-book named world.” The poet compares his body to a temple, and his open shirt to its open gates. In another poem the poet is a mother’s lap, on which “God of the whole world” sits for a hug, “whispering in love: You!... You!...”¹¹⁰ In this period of time Shlonsky also described a demonic, decadent, dangerous woman (Blok’s later version of the Beautiful Lady) as a metaphor for the world, nature or life. In his “Our Tent”¹¹¹ the time is sunset and the poet is standing and waiting for the revelation of the sacred woman, but instead, when evening appears, he sees a negro who serves Shulamit (the heroine of The Song of Songs and also Salomé, Herod’s daughter) the skull of the poet’s day “on the twilight’s tray,” reminiscent of how John’s skull was served to Salomé.

The sacred woman in Shlonsky’s poems of the mid-1920s symbolizes the land of Israel or the pioneer’s physical work. This work is described as a ritual, and the pioneers themselves are described as being sacrificed and redeemed on the land’s altar and difficult climate. The land is both the poet’s bride, who sings him songs of fertility, and *megilat brit hadasha* (a new testament scroll).¹¹² On the Gilboa mountain (located in the Valley of Izraël, a center of Zionist agricultural settlements) the *Shekhina* is cooing like a dove, and from the soil of the Izraël Valley rises the smell of Torah or of the *Shem ha-meforash* (the name of God which it is forbidden to pronounce).

In the thirties the symbolic meaning of the sacred woman in Shlonsky’s poetry changed; now she became a symbol of the human spirit, of the poet’s belief in artistic creativity and in beauty for its own sake, and also of the poet’s right to devote himself to her and to enjoy her while disconnecting himself from social obligations. This right is not easy for the poet to accept,

108 Shlonsky, *ibid.*, p. 169.

109 *Ibid.*, pp. 172-174.

110 *Ibid.*, 5th poems in the cycle “Izraël,” p. 185.

111 *Ibid.*, p. 191.

112 *Ibid.*, p. 184.

and taking advantage of it causes him inner conflicts and guilt feelings which he tries to overcome. The cycle “Happy am I”¹¹³ begins with the poet’s estrangement from “my brothers,” but his anger at them changes into forgiveness when *Peli* (Mysterious) appears on a chariot of fire. This symbolic image hints at a similarity between the poet and the prophet Eliyahu, who was taken to heaven in a fiery chariot (Kings 2 2:11). In comparing himself to a Biblical prophet, Shlonsky had in mind neither a religious nor a political mission, but the chosen status of the artist. A mystical experience appears in the second poem of this cycle: “Embarrassed I went out, but a miracle did happen:/a chased deer happened on my way, his horns fiery./ I saw a lily in the burning darkness/ with golden thorns screening: secret!”¹¹⁴ The lily, which in the Zohar symbolizes *Kneset Israel* and the *sephira Malkhut* (= *Shekhina*),¹¹⁵ here has a symbolic meaning which it acquired in Symbolist poetry: the sacredness of art and the artist. This is the meaning of the feminine image in Shlonsky’s cycle *Shevi* (Captivity).¹¹⁶ She is here characterized by Sophiological traits and epithets: she is a princess; she mediates between “grass and star” (earth and heaven); she is *ruakh be’enosh* (the spirit of humanity); she is “a twilight of Gods and crime.” The poet feels her presence as *pa’amei nadiv*, steps of a generous one, alluding to The Song of Songs 7:2, upon which the poet awaits Shulamit, whose steps can already be heard. According to mystical midrash, these steps mean the steps of the Messiah (*Shmot Raba* 15). Shlonsky’s princess, like Sophia, suffered from adventures which blemished her perfection, dismissed her from her throne and threw her crowns into the abyss. The poet can hardly see her because of the storm. His attraction to her fills him with anxiety, because to him she is “sin and madness,” but then he hears a voice which tells him to take the risk of her love and to “sing” in spite of the depressing reality. He tries to lock the door of his soul, but then he hears a double voice knocking on his gate — hers and the “storm’s.” At first he refuses to open his gate for her, but then he cannot resist any more, and he obeys her command. His sacrifice does not dimin-

113 Ibid., pp. 293-294

114 Ibid., p. 293.

115 Tishbi, *Zohar*, vol. 1 pp. 235-236.

116 Shlonsky, *Poems*, vol. 2 pp. 96-98.

ish her cruelty. She calls him “Damned! Damned!” (the French Symbolists called themselves “*poètes maudits*,” damned poets), indicating the artist’s position in Socialist Eretz-Israel, but in spite of this the poet prefers to join those “whose blood chooses beauty.”

In the cycle “Bereavement”¹¹⁷ the woman represents the world and life. The first poem is written in the first person plural, and the woman described is a mother who is able to walk in chaos and still find sacredness in it. She comes from the heavenly world and the pioneers identify her and describe her in words which remind one of Blok’s description of the Beautiful Lady: “She came from there. And we knew: it is she!” They unite with her divinity when they themselves become “not understandable/like a lamb/ like God/ like a child.” They are redeemed when they find in themselves a fresh enigmatic belief, like a child’s belief in his mother, necessary like the presence of synagogue in the reality of a religious child. This belief includes the expectation of “a day of birth and grace.” The pioneer’s *Horrah* dance is an ecstatic monologue of redemption addressed to the anonymous sacred Woman.

In Shlonsky’s book *Al Mileit (Inlaid with Jewels*; the poems were written from 1939 to 1947), womanhood turns into a symbol of archaic pagan desires and of elementary corporeal hungers, and contact with heavenly spirituality demanding self-sacrifice. Satiation of the senses’ desires becomes a sacred value. Here it is not hard work which is a sacred ritual, but the poet’s powerful sensual delight in the Valley’s landscapes and other landscapes which he keeps in his memory. Even the delight of eating represents the sacredness of physical existence. In the poem “A Meal,”¹¹⁸ the sky is compared to a group of hungry animals. The mother and sisters who cook the meal are described as mythical feminine images of divine wisdom. The mystical sacredness of the body is also expressed in the poem “A Very Blue Morning,”¹¹⁹ in which the *Shekhina* descends so as to return the primeval *ki tov* (“It is good,” God’s daily reflection on his creation in Genesis 1). The poet says “The soul is the blood [alluding to ‘for the blood is the soul’ Lev. 17:11]/ but it is also singing azure.”

117 Ibid., pp. 149-151.

118 Ibid., p. 278.

119 Ibid., p. 324.

Like Bialik and Alterman, Shlonsky used the symbol of the sacred woman as an expression of sacred values on more than one level. She represents ideological, existential and poetic values which sometimes clash with each other and are not always entirely clear. They can be interpreted as the pioneer's devotion to physical work in Eretz-Israel; physical vitality; human spirituality; artistic creativity; life itself; the satiation of elementary physical needs; or belief in values in general.

In spite of Shlonsky's use of Biblical allusions and Jewish mystical symbols, the Woman in his poetry does not represent the traditional Jewish spirit; in this sense he is completely different from Bialik and Alterman. Shlonsky attributes sacredness to the self, the senses, the body and its simple existential needs. He also tends to attribute redeeming sacredness to the male self, and thus the poet himself can appear in the mythological role of Sophia.

Shlonsky's Woman is very different from Soloviev's and Blok's, however. The Russian poets inherited the Gnostic myth, which expresses an ascetic world view. From this world view the sexual drive is the source of evil in the world; overcoming it creates redeeming Wisdom. This was the direction the Sophia myth took in Christianity, which emphasized spiritual and ascetic ideals. The incongruence between pure spirituality and bare sexuality characterizes the Russian Symbolist Sophia, to a greater or lesser extent. As mentioned above, Sophia, the ideal woman, is static, frozen, mysterious, distant, heavenly, wrapped with a halo of light, and smiling sadly. This portrayal was maintained by Bialik. In contrast, Shlonsky's Woman is active, sensual, provocatively corporeal, sometimes even vulgar, and the man's redemption is a result of the liberation of the desires and a Dionysian ecstatic devotion to the earthliness of the landscape of Eretz-Israel and the world as a whole. Shlonsky's sacred femininity does not represent a spiritual ideal. The ideal, rather, is a unity with the Biblical land, with its beautiful and cruel climate and landscapes. It is interesting to note that while in Symbolist poetry the Woman appears in twilight or at dawn, wrapped with shadows or lighted by pale moonlight or candlelight, in Shlonsky's poems she appears in full daylight and sun.

Shlonsky's woman is a unity of heaven and earth. For him spirit is not sacred by itself. Shlonsky rejects the religious aspect of this symbol by emphasizing the sacredness of the body, the sweat of work, physical labor and food.

Sophiology in Alterman's "Stars Outside"

Alterman's early poetry from before "Stars Outside" (1938) does not bear traces of Sophiology and Russian Symbolism in general. In the non-canonical poems of the early 1930s there are two main models of woman: the Romantic sentimentalist mother and the decadent *femme fatale*. During this period of time young Alterman wrote an impressive number of poems about relationships between son and mother,¹²⁰ indicating the important place his mother had in his emotional life and also the sacred value of motherhood in his world view. The young poet treats with anxiety and rejection the idea that his mother will take part in social activities which demand that she leaves "the temple of home."¹²¹ Attractive women who are described in other early poems are versions of the decadent *femme fatale*: a frivolous, sexy, cruel woman, devoid of any moral impetus, who frightens the man and even arouses in him murderous drives. This model shows the influence of French Symbolist poetry, particularly that of Baudelaire, of whom Alterman was fond at that time, as evidenced in his translations, his poetic prose and in his poems themselves.¹²²

The decadent woman's traits continue to pop up here and there in "Stars Outside" as well: in "Eternal Meeting," "To the Elephants" and the "The Fire's Nakedness" the woman is powerful, conquering, cruel and predatory.¹²³ In the first stanza of "You Alone" the adorned and spoiled woman is represented by her cold and polished metal-like thighs.¹²⁴ The woman in "The Mountain of Silences" attracts the man-poet in spite of or perhaps because of the death fright she arouses in him and the strangeness she exudes. However, in this collection of poems the Woman's decadent traits are combined into a system of paradoxical contrasts, characteristic of Symbolism. The paradoxical traits of the Woman in "Stars Outside" continue the basic paradoxical characteriza-

120 Alterman, *Early Poems*, pp. 26, 58, 91, 113, 127, 156.

121 *Ibid.*, p. 27.

122 Kartun-Bloom, "A First and Second Smile"; Shamir, *Alterman*, pp. 80-81.

123 Alterman, *Poems from Long Ago*, pp. 8-9, 19-23, 103-107.

124 *Ibid.*, p. 67.

tion of the Gnostic Sophia and the unity of contrasts in French and Russian Symbolism. Alterman uses paradox as a principle of organizing his world even more radically than the Symbolists, and the result — a more modernistic one — has a grotesque effect. Shamir noticed this phenomenon¹²⁵ and came to the conclusion that Alterman's Woman resembles Blok's Beautiful Lady As we shall see later, some of the contrasts on which Blok built his Woman were inherited by Alterman's Woman: she is both earthly and spiritual, merciful and cruel, national and universal. However, Alterman added more contrasts, which did not grow from Symbolist soil, but from the development of the Sacred Woman in Hebrew poetry, or from his independent creative imagination.

Alterman's early love poems document meetings with real women in realistic backgrounds, while in "Stars Outside," like in Symbolist poetry, the woman represents metaphysical beings and abstract ideas which the poet worships. In contrast to those in the early poems, the woman in "Stars Outside" is authoritative and talented, with wisdom, clarity and judgment: qualities which were never mentioned in earlier poems. Thus, for example, in "Eternal Meeting" the poet says "You are the only judge and sin of books."¹²⁶ Here, then, wisdom is beyond the wisdom of books and beyond the difference between good and evil. In an untitled poem, the poet turns to the addressee and tells her that the world has lost its mind: "Here they pack, my beauty, the remnants of wisdom/ like collars and papers are packed for escape." The lack of wisdom in the world causes him to yearn for the addressee, because "You are the ancient, *tsalul* [clear, sane, sober] note."¹²⁷ The word *tslula* (feminine of *tsalul*) repeats in another untitled poem, in which the poet wishes to make the woman think "that I am clear/ and my hands are pure and my mind is *tslula*."¹²⁸ For Alterman, sobriety and clarity are not in opposition to poetic inspiration. One of the poems in "Stars Outside" begins with the words: "Let it be told in peace and in wisdom."¹²⁹ In "The Birth of the Street," the frozen sky above the street is a starting point for a process of creation. This wisdom is not Classicist ra-

125 Shamir, *Alterman*, p. 73

126 Alterman, *Poems from Long Ago*, p. 8.

127 *Ibid.*, p. 68

128 *Ibid.*, p. 117.

129 *Ibid.*, p. 142.

tionalism (which he ironically mocks in the poem “A Sudden Day”), but in a divine, intuitive wisdom which lightens the world.

Like the Gnostic Sophia (and the woman who appears in some of Soloviev’s poems), Alterman’s Woman is sometimes the father’s daughter (“A Hot Night”) or the world’s (“The Barman’s Daughter”), or the poet’s (“Autumn Wine”). Sometimes she is a beloved or a mother (“The Strange Song,” “Your Night,” “The Third Mother”). In many poems she is *ha-alma* (the maiden or the virgin). The similarity between the feminine image and Jesus is hinted at by “Your night (...) which suffered my illness,” alluding to “He suffered our illness” (Isaiah 55:4), which Christian thought believes refers to Jesus.

The Woman’s mythic, divine, heavenly redeeming character in “Stars Outside” is one of the signs of Alterman’s affiliation, despite his personal non-religious views, to the theological roots of the Sophiological tradition. In “*Tamuz* (July)” she is *almat ha-shamayim* (sky’s/heaven’s maiden/virgin).¹³⁰ In “You Alone” the stars and the bears alike adore her beauty and desire her, while the fields, the trees and the night carry the hem of her robe. She is adored by the poet, by “us,” and by the elements of nature. Religious connotations can be found also in “Your night (...) which could answer only by your One name” (“You Alone”),¹³¹ creating a parallel between Her and God’s Oneness.

Her heavenly status is characterized by light, which wraps her like a halo. In many poems she is “clear,” and “lightens” the dark soul of the poet. Her face and eyes, like Sophia’s, are lightened by a smile¹³² whose light joins an expression of sadness.¹³³ The redeeming light of her eyes¹³⁴ is heavenly. She appears together with a star as a final accord. In fact, she is the “stars” in the title of “Stars Outside,” a continuation of Morning Star in Bialik’s “The Scroll of Fire.”

Like Sophia, she is covered with white (“You Alone”). When she is a mother who carries a dead child in her lap, she is “white and eternal,” sculptured in stone or marble (“The Fire”).¹³⁵ Like Sophia, and like Bialik’s lake, she is

130 Ibid., p. 99.

131 Ibid., p. 73.

132 Ibid., p. 17.

133 Ibid., p. 54.

134 Ibid., p. 128.

135 Ibid., p. 28.

“daughter-eye,” reflected in the symbolic landscape where the poet arrives during his search for himself. In this landscape the way “*nifkakh*” (opens like an eye)¹³⁶ and the water of the lake is “looking at us” (“A Moon”).¹³⁷ Alterman’s Woman is a combination of a Madonna and a Goddess. She bestows mercy and grace, she is *rakhuma* (merciful, a word which is used in the masculine for God).¹³⁸ She is also of miraculous powers, possessing an ability to create and recreate, to revive and fertilize the man’s spirit, while exchanging the masculine-feminine roles: “And our heart became pregnant” (“Song of Three Brothers”).¹³⁹

The man-poet yearns for the meeting that will unite them and put an end to the suffering of the daughter/mother and her knight. This meeting is a revelation, an emotional climax, a miracle of redemption. It is a mythological unity between the poet and heaven: “The virgin of heaven/ is laughing naked .../ Kiss her, kiss her on her mouth” (“Tamuz”).¹⁴⁰ Her descriptions allude to biblical contexts which describe eschatological redemption or the reward of the righteous. Thus in “To the Elephants”: “The Virgin will fall on her face, moaning: the sky is walking, the sky is walking./ And a small boy is leading them”¹⁴¹ (Isaiah 11:6). “Your orphans will not weep/ I collected them./ a light of innocence and poverty is already sown for me.”¹⁴²

Together with redemption, the Woman causes a spiritual change in the poet, and in that sense she recreates him or rebirths him in her image. The meeting between them takes the poet out of everyday life into her world, a world of holiday, festive elevation and ecstasy. Now he can be in immediate contact with *tevel* (the whole world), with life, nature, and earth, with heavenly spirituality, beauty and art. The meetings bestow upon the poet purity and clearness of thought. This feminine image is both the spirit of the world, life, beauty and poetry, and the source of wisdom and purity.

136 Ibid., p. 7.

137 Ibid., p. 37.

138 Ibid., p. 22.

139 Ibid., p. 120.

140 Ibid., p. 98.

141 Ibid., p. 20.

142 Ibid., p. 78

Alterman's Woman, like Soloviev's and Blok's, is mysterious. Her identity and place of dwelling is known only to the poet and to other mythical beings, but it is his duty to share this knowledge: "the summer (...) will implore that I shall tell him where and who you are/ for it is forbidden to keep you for myself only" ("A Quarter's Corner").¹⁴³ In the same poem the poet expects her to appear in his dream. Her portrait is vague, she "trembles like a reflection in the water" ("The Essence of Evening").¹⁴⁴ Her presence is doubtful: the poet only guesses at her arrival, or only hears her voice. She is a few times characterized by her sometimes trembling eyelashes (like Sophia and Bialik's Morning Star),¹⁴⁵ which give her a flickering impression and characterize her butterfly-like delicacy. The woman's vagueness and anonymity strengthen the symbolic, dreamlike impression that she belongs to a superhuman level, beyond this world. She represents abstract, transcendent beings.

Like The Gnostic Sophia and the Jewish *Shekhina*, Alterman's Woman is not disconnected from or in contrast to reality. On the contrary, she is the contact between heaven and earth, which enable a mutual connection of creation (by heaven) and elevation (by humanity). Her revelation is a momentary descent, like the revelation of *Shekhina*. She appears in the street like lightning: "Only for a moment, in the cold, strong brightness/ heaven will come to the street" ("Autumn Wine").¹⁴⁶ The Woman's ability to connect the heavenly world and the material-corporeal one is the source of her redeeming power.

Like Sophia, Alterman's Woman is an independent divine power, not only an emanation of superior divinity or part of a heavenly system. She is a queen or an Empress, demanding worship, reigning over lands, lodging in a castle surrounded by a garden and a wall, closed in by gates. Alterman does not use the Middle Age word *gvira* (Lady); he prefers *alma* (maiden, virgin, girl) and *keisarit* (Empress), which shows that in this stage of his career he absorbed elements from Russian Symbolism.

As a counterpart to the legendary image of the woman, the poet plays the role of the errant knight, who prays for her, endangers himself, and suffers. He is ready

143 Ibid., p. 120

144 Ibid., p. 74.

145 Ibid., p. 7, 76, 124, 132.

146 Ibid., p. 71.

to sacrifice his desires for her, to tear himself to pieces, to put his life as a foot-stool under her feet. The worship of the poet for the Woman is a motif which appears throughout "Stars Outside," beginning with the first poem ("not once have you worshipped lying down to a green grove and a laughing woman") and ending with the last, "Poem in a Forest Tavern," in which the third brother dies while he picks a flower for the Mother. Worship, here, means the man's absolute devotion unto death. In "Eternal Meeting," the poet is ready to wound his head in order to save the woman's smile from the wheels of the metropolis. Like in Blok's and Bailik's poems, the man here finds himself worshipping the Woman not alone, but together with many others: "It is good that your hand catches our heart" ("Eternal Meeting").¹⁴⁷ He is different from them in that he is ready to suffer and sacrifice more, and because he does not demand anything for himself: "do not implore to those who retreat./ I alone shall wander in your lands";¹⁴⁸ "I did not ask for anything. This is why/ the cyclamen on my way was so red."¹⁴⁹ It is clear to him that a meeting with her is not possible without his complete devotion: "Only when the soul becomes a lamb in the storm / you will agree to accept it."¹⁵⁰

Along with the similarities between the Sophiological woman and Alterman's, there are also important differences. Alterman's Woman is more vital and dramatic. She represents contrasting poles which clash sharply: sadness and poverty, on the one hand, and ecstatic joy, even frivolity, on the other. Sophia smiles sadly, Alterman's Woman laughs loudly. Sophia is lightened with mysterious soft light while Alterman's Woman is dwelling in "a poor home so dark at night/ and certainly endlessly sad" ("I Shall Come To Your Threshold").¹⁵¹ What she means for the poet is simultaneously dawn and sunset ("In the Mountain of Silences").¹⁵² This contrast does not create harmony but a dramatic tension.

Following Sophiology, Alterman connects the poet's inner redemption with wisdom and clarity of mind, but he does not accept the connection between wis-

147 Ibid., p. 8.

148 Ibid.

149 Ibid., p. 98.

150 Ibid.

151 Ibid., p. 56.

152 Ibid, p. 65.

dom and disconnection from the earthly world. Redemption for him includes joy, laughing, frivolity, primitive naivety, and even aggressive drives. Moments of miraculous happiness are paradoxical, absurd: “The alien day, clear unto stupidity./ There are no brothers to his eyes and his laughter” (“To the Grove”).¹⁵³

Throughout “Stars Outside” the poet mentions again and again his wish to desert the feminine model of his predecessors, which for him is too spiritual and demanding. In the opening poem the man caresses and deserts “a sheep and an *ayelet* [a she-deer, also Morning Star].” The sheep is the woman who sacrifices herself, maybe the sacred mother, while the she-deer is a mystical symbol, connected with Bialik’s Morning Star, a woman-star, which symbolizes spiritual ideals and national redemption. Both are of tender, delicate, vulnerable, naïve, pure femininity. Alterman prefers to worship a happy, vital, tempestuous, dynamic, Dionysian femininity. In contrast to the modest Morning Star light by which Bialik’s hero finds his way to the sacred fire, Alterman’s poet walks under quick lightning bolts which move to and fro “like the flight of a swing.” He comes to the woman “with empty hands,” preferring the laughing woman over the woman-sacrifice. Alterman’s demand for joy as an inner redemption can be understood as a Jewish mystical alternative, based on the Hassidic idea of joy, against the ascetic Sophiology.

The tempestuous nature of the Woman is portrayed in the second poem of “Stars Outside,” “Eternal Meeting.”¹⁵⁴ She is not a star in the sky, nor a hidden reflection in the water, but a main character in a drama which takes place on “a fighting street,” in “deaf and painful mercantile cities.” Like a reaper in the field, she waves her hands with strong movements and throws down the poet like a sheaf. She is an irresistible huge power, quick as a snare (“it’s good that your hand still traps our heart”). The quick pace, also demanded from those who worship her, is of an importance worthy of the utmost effort. Their powerful movement keeps the heart from becoming “dark as a room,” leaving in it (the heart) some light from stars which “were left outside,” beyond the depressing reality.

In order to keep this light, the light of the redeeming joy, away from the sadness “there,” it is necessary to behave with frivolity, naughtiness, even vul-

153 Ibid., p. 125.

154 Ibid., pp. 8-9.

garity — to accept the kiss of the woman-cook, to laugh at the cough of the old sky/heaven, to pick up a handkerchief dropped by an old sycamore and bow in gestures of false courting. The vital joy seems to be an escape from the dark room of reality, but it turns out to be the result of a playful contact with the low level of reality. It is an escape from the national and social mission of the poet and from the sacrificial devotion to it. Paradoxically, the knightly devotion of the poet to the Woman also brings “almonds and raisins” (an allusion to Jewish cradle songs) to her children. In other words, the poet’s mission does continue the contact with the Jewish spirit.

Why is the struggle to meet with the Woman so difficult? What are the obstacles which the poet must overcome? In contrast to the Sophiological narrative, which emphasizes the difficulty in overcoming egoism, and to its development in Bialik’s poetry, in which the poet must overcome personal love, and in contrast as well to Shlonsky’s work, in which the obstacles are socialist anti-religious ideas, in Alterman’s “Stars Outside” the obstacle is the genetic national sadness which dominates the poet and his generation. Already in the opening poems the poet characterizes himself as *ani* (poor, alluding to the Talmudic “the poor is similar to the dead,” Nedarim, ch. 9), dead within himself. His hands are empty, he is walking in “cold iron long streets” in a feeling of inner desert, coldness and emptiness. The poet is intending to go “to the edges of sadness” in order to reach the woman who will lighten his heart. The poet’s body is like a king in a prison, depressed and humiliated, whose “dark weeping made a hole in our hearts” (“To Elephants”).¹⁵⁵ The poet will come to the woman from “lands of fast.” His poem is a cripple who needs a miracle. He will come to her “on stilts” to tell her about “the wild melancholy which wants only you.”¹⁵⁶ With such personal data, there is no wonder that joy is an impossible mission or a miracle.

Together with mythic divine traits, Alterman also attributes to the woman characteristics of everyday life and vulgarity. She can live not only in a castle but also in “a small house” and can wear “a simple apron” (“The Quarter’s Corner”).¹⁵⁷ The wanderer is ready to put down his sack on the threshold of a market (“Sun-

155 Ibid., p. 21.

156 Ibid., p. 68.

157 Ibid., p. 128, 129.

ny Market”).¹⁵⁸ Together with the stars outside, the moon “is burning like a cook’s kiss” (“Eternal Meeting”).¹⁵⁹ She is not a sheep but an “uddery cow” (“To Elephants”),¹⁶⁰ not only a sacred mother but also a simple “nanny of the heart” (“An Evening in the Tavern of Poems”),¹⁶¹ not only a mysterious heavenly Madonna, but also an innkeeper, waitress, or barman’s daughter, or even just “a high school girl” (“The Barrel Organ Departs”).¹⁶² She is not only a monster of beauty, but also a woman who “drinks her tea” (“The River”).¹⁶³ These characteristics strengthen the realistic dimension, creating an impression that this is not just a symbol but a real woman whom Alterman loved.

In “Stars Outside,” Alterman is close to the later Symbolists (such as Blok and Biely and Pasternak, along with Rilke and Kafka in Germany) who sometimes see the poet not as a poet-prophet, but as a clown or tight-rope walker. In the opening poem, the lightning’s “see-saw flight” creates a circus-like decoration. In the second poem, “Eternal Meeting,” the redeeming joy is described as a theatrical clown jesting and compared to other childhood delights which were considered vulgar or stupid to adults. The poem “Circus”¹⁶⁴ is a childhood memory of the poet’s visit to a circus. The child’s joyful laugh is described as a mystical experience: “In you my soul is laughing unto the seventh gallery” — a word play on the expression “unto the seventh heaven.” Alterman stresses the sub-cultural and vulgar character of the joy in the circus: “A galley vis-à-vis a gallery splitting sunflower seeds.” Like in “Eternal Meeting,” these sub-cultural details contribute to the redeeming joy together with more elevated symbols. *Gar’inim* (sunflower seeds) rhymes with *yonim* (doves). Alterman deserts the knightly image of the poet by describing him as a wanderer who has temporary relationships with various women whose distinguished births are meaningless to him, and who is excited by the moon, which burns like a cook’s kiss.

158 Ibid., p. 127.

159 Ibid., p. 9.

160 Ibid., p. 22.

161 Ibid., p. 15.

162 Ibid., p. 113.

163 Ibid., p. 78.

164 Ibid., pp. 134-135.

The woman's Dionysian stormy vitality is the source of the man's redemption. In "Autumn Wine"¹⁶⁵ she is "wet/ perfumed, despaired, stormy"; thus she overcomes the autumn night which is "big as the dying kingdom." The light of redemption is the lightning's, which tears the "dresses of the avenue" and rapes it. The presence of a heavenly world is a result of cooperation with a tough, aggressive power. When heaven descends to the street for a moment, the light is cold and strong. Such a view of aggression as a stage in the process of redemption appears in the later development of Sophiology in the poems of Blok and Pasternak.

In contrast to the Sophiological woman, the woman in "Stars Outside" has two faces: one of redeeming joyful femininity and an opposite one, whose sadness is killing. The poets' rejection of the second one does not erase her presence. The poet is conscious of her demands of him and aware of the possibility that he will unite with her, and he struggles against it: "Eternal one! I did not call your freezing name./ Do not descend to my day from the mountain./ From your brilliant bereavement, from your lips on my mouth/ from your death in my eyes — I am afraid" ("In the Mountain of Silences").¹⁶⁶ The poet struggles against the woman who represents his own inner death. The ego's powers of life struggle against his own sadness, which is a threatening "sickness." His life, which he offered to be the woman's foot-stool, is "so dear/expensive for me." He rejects her by saying "You are alien. You are alien. Do not come now," because the burning which he once felt when he touched her is fading. What once seemed like a festive banquet is now too expensive and too difficult an effort. From the symbolic image of this woman, only night and sadness were left, and the poet wishes to distance himself from them and from her.

Alterman could find the motif of "too big a price" in Bialik's "The Hungry Eyes," but in Bialik's poem the poet rejects the woman who spoiled his purity, while Alterman rejects something which exists in himself. When the poet says "Do not come now. I hold a dead child in my lap," he himself is a feminine image who represents his emotional situation. This is why the Woman

165 Ibid., p. 71.

166 Ibid., p. 66

sometimes appears in “Stars Outside” (and also in “The Joy of the Poor”) as poor, sad and sick. She is for the poet “the sadness of my life.”

In “In the Mountain of Silences”¹⁶⁷ Alterman declares that this woman, not the joyful one, is in the root of his soul: “But only your fright is kissed by me more than all.” In a strange and paradoxical way, the presence of death is the most living thing in himself: “But I know — in vain [I am trying to kill you]! You are breathing! You are here!/ You are in the depth of my life which is dying to you.” In order to destroy her, the poet has to destroy an old factor in his own personality, which is split into “twins.” The strong, vital “brother,” who is ready to fight and to be cruel, must destroy the sad and tired one. This is the story in “Poem of Three Brothers,”¹⁶⁸ where the tired, dying eldest brother shuts his eyes and the younger brother announces his death with a big smile and shining teeth. His death enables the other two brothers to meet the maiden. The murder or death of the hero who represents sadness is needed for the birth of joy, and the festival of vitality is needed for the inner release from inborn sadness. In “On Behalf of this City”¹⁶⁹ the poet tells the Woman that only when “My body breathes and his festival has no rest” the “sadness of his life” is allowed to come and touch him without threatening his survival. In “On Stilts” the poet says, “For I am praying/ that you will be mine/ only in order that I can forget you.”¹⁷⁰ Poetry, which grows from the poet’s sadness, enables him to free himself and to be redeemed of the burden which chokes him like a stone on the throat of a person who throws himself into deep water. The freedom from the burden of sadness is also compared to getting down from the gallows: “If God thus wishes we shall get down from the gallows/ and Your image will leave our eyes.”¹⁷¹

The plot or narrative which is told in “Stars Outside” is different from the Sophiological one, and of course this is also a difference of meaning. Sophia’s Symbolist story is a romance, whose hero is a wandering knight who devotes himself unto death to the goal of meeting his woman-bride. Alterman, however, expresses the poet’s anxiety about taking on an impossible mission and

167 Ibid., pp. 66-67.

168 Ibid., pp. 118-120.

169 Ibid., pp. 138-139.

170 Ibid., p. 68.

171 Ibid., p. 69.

his doubt about whether he will be able to pass the way in peace. In the ending poem, he wrote: "How shall I set off alone to pass the transparency of the quiet flood? (...) The flute of the shepherd will also be devoured without reaching the edge."¹⁷² The shepherd and the flute represent poetry of a poet prophet who intends to be a leader. It is not clear which animals will devour the shepherd's flute (not his sheep!), but it is clear that the way is dangerous.

Moreover, the way of the wanderer cannot lead anybody to the expected goal. Even without enemies, whoever takes on this burden buckles under it. Of the three brothers who go to meet the Maiden, the biggest one falls down, perhaps dead or blind, in the middle of the way, and the two others desert him and his mission. The son whom the mother is awaiting in "The Third Mother" will never reach her.¹⁷³

Is the unity meeting with the woman a sacred mission at all? The poem "Singing"¹⁷⁴ denies it. In the beginning of this poem the evening is described as a wanderer who turns to go to the mountains. He goes there not in order to meet but in order to desert the Maiden. The deserted Maiden goes out to the threshold "as if to a dream" and collapses together with her song. Between the two pictures, of the deserting evening and the deserted "song Maiden," the poet provocatively declares: "The hour of departures, how sacred you are!" In the second and last stanza of this poem it becomes clear that the world can manage very well without the expected meeting: "and the world remained in three words,/ in wide fields and wind." This means that what is really important is the way itself, spiritual freedom, not devotion to a mission.

Another interesting innovation in Alterman's Sophiological narrative is that the wanderer is looking for "an old way" and "an old melody which were deserted."¹⁷⁵ The meeting with the woman is then a return to a woman whom the poet knew and deserted in a former transformation, and now he wishes to return to her. This narrative is characteristic of Romantic poetry, where coming back to the sources (to childhood, homeland, primitive simplicity,

172 Ibid., p. 145.

173 Ibid., pp. 123-124.

174 Ibid., pp. 122-123.

175 Ibid., pp. 7, 13-15.

the nation's past) is a recipe for emotional revival. Here, however, the return is supposed to take place only after a catastrophe and a destruction from which the woman was miraculously saved. "Remember (they sing)/ my city was burnt./ Remember (they sing)/ my skull was beheaded,/ But God's hand is groping in the smoke/ to save you/ from the zoo of fire" ("An Evening in the Tavern of Songs").¹⁷⁶ In "The Fire" not only the innkeeper with the broad hips is saved from the catastrophe, but also the marble statue of the "mother and her broken child (...) white and eternal like the whiteness of swans," running alone like a miracle of survival from what used to be permanent and glorious.¹⁷⁷ The poet-knight-wanderer does not take an active part in saving the woman, and does not even try to save her, because he is himself a victim of the same catastrophe.

It seems that the historical events which Alterman thought of when he wrote "Stars Outside" — the First World War, the Russian Revolution, and their effects on Jewish life — were sufficient grounds for his doubts about the poet's or leader's ability to save collective beliefs and values which were harmed. The poet can only "whisper regards" to them ("A Moon").¹⁷⁸ The contrasting images of woman in "The Fire" — the innkeeper and the marble mother — are symbols of an old, non-modern reality, one which the poet embraces with nostalgia and respect. This Romantic stance of the poet is characteristic of the first section of "Stars Outside" (pp. 7-62). In the second section (pp. 64-109) the woman moves from the abstract "mountain of silences" to the city's streets, markets and squares. Alterman not only mixes together Romantic nature with modernistic urban landscapes (like later Blok), he finds in the city itself the power of revival which was attributed to nature by Romanticism, and uses the symbol of the woman to represent it. In the first poem of the second section, it's the city, not the castle, which belongs to the woman. The wanderer arrives at "Your city" and the sky/heaven descends to the street's paving stones, while the street mixes with the sky's stormy sea, whose water miraculously stands upright, like the Red Sea during the exodus from Egypt.

176 *Ibid.*, p. 14.

177 *Ibid.*, pp. 26-27.

178 *Ibid.*, p. 37.

In the third section, the lively, fighting city becomes a symbol of the divine femininity and a heroine of the Sophiological myth, and the poet should sacrifice himself to her: “This is the city (...) / who, at least once, will not carry his soul, like a lamb, to her?” (The Market Day)¹⁷⁹ Like Sophia, Alterman’s city is “radiating,” she is a queen wrapped with a halo of brilliance, and she is great like a goddess. “I have not found words as big as her” (“The Birth of the Street”).¹⁸⁰ She is a transformation of both the simple shepherd Shulamith from The Song of Songs (including its mystical connotations) and the “queen” Sophia, whom Alterman finds in the market and at the fair. “You wear Shulamith’s shoes (...) when you go like a queen (...) to the fair” (“The Market Day”).¹⁸¹ For the poet’s soul, the city’s central square is both a biblical purifying ritual bath and a cistern of sparkling wine. Both elements revive him: “A sparkling square — a tyrant cistern of light!/ from *shaharit* (dawn, morning prayer) parapet I am thrown to you,/ I saw how from the bath ascends / my soul who dives in your fountains’ noise!” (“Spring Sights”)¹⁸² The poet’s knightly fight for the woman is taking place in the urban space, where “the fighting grooms” for the city are the street (“Day of the Street”) and the builder with his saws’ iron (“The Birth of the Street”), who in their aggressive actions court the city, fertilize her and help her to give birth: “for in pain and in power the street should be born.”¹⁸³ The image of the woman as a mother who gives birth does not belong to Russian Sophiology, but to its Jewish versions.

One more difference between the Sophiological myth and its transformations in “Stars Outside” is the blurring of borders or even an exchange between the man and the woman (common to Alterman and Shlonsky). The redeeming woman, who in earlier versions (as well as in some poems in “Stars Outside”) is an outside, distant goal for the man, is here sometimes to be found inside the poet’s self. As mentioned above, the poet can carry a dead child in his lap, and the brother’s heart becomes pregnant after meeting the Maiden. Shlonsky viewed his own body as a mythological redeeming sacred being,

179 Ibid., p. 87.

180 Ibid., 108, 109.

181 Ibid., p. 89

182 Ibid., p. 97.

183 Ibid., pp. 91-94, 108-109.

and described it as feminine. Alterman bestows feminine traits not to the man's body but to his whole personality and life. He even identifies his soul with the Maiden: "For here is/ my soul the Maiden,/ perfumed with fields and myrrh,/ to you, to you she comes out naked,/ to fall on the chest of light" ("To Elephants").¹⁸⁴ Instead of the ascetic knight's spiritual and altruistic goal, the poet here nominates himself as the sacred goal. Self-love becomes a superior moral commandment. In an untitled poem the poet says: "for how will the kid be prepared for his sacred death/ if his life does not kiss his own forehead?"¹⁸⁵ This can be understood as stating that only love (or even self-idolization) can empower the poet with life and artistic creation. In the same poem the sacred objects of devotion are numbered: "My life,/ my head,/ my precious eyes!" Not Morning Star's eyes but "our deer-eyes" are praised. It is not the stars, symbols of ideals, that light the world; it is "our eyes" that open the world's eyes: "To all our deer-eyes — praise and *halleguja!*/ How many are the visions which they open!" Forgiveness and mercy are Sophia's role, but here the woman should ask the man's forgiveness: "Appease me for the sin you've done to me (...) say: forgive" ("To Elephants").

Other transformations in the image of the man-poet show cancellation of the moral value of his devotion to the way and to the woman. The man is characterized not by altruism and asceticism, but by theatrical fighting or obsessive actions. In "A Storm on the Threshold," he is a toreador who waves the red sky; his courting is done "with evil and oaths and despaired whisper."¹⁸⁶ In "Tamuz" the worshipping man is himself a victim of brutality: "I was thrown on my knees, commanded — Cry!"¹⁸⁷

To sum up: Alterman brought to extremity the paradoxes in the Sophiological woman. He even split her into two different characters, one stormy and joyful, the second frozen and dead within herself. One redeems and the second depresses and kills. They both symbolize the split personality of the poet himself: he yearns for joy and is able to be joyful while at the same time he is depressed, "poor" and "dead." Alterman stressed the vital, Dionysian elements

184 Ibid., p. 23.

185 Ibid., p. 139.

186 Ibid., p. 83.

187 Ibid., p. 98.

of the divine femininity and combined with them “low” everyday elements. The man is not a knight who sets off on his way to a heroic mission, but a man who deserted the way of redemption and now returns to it, but is afraid of the mission and the way, not sure that he will ever achieve it, not sure even of the importance of the trip, of the meeting and of the loyal devotion. Alterman moves the decoration of the symbolic events to the modern metropolis, and describes the city itself as a redeeming Lady. The street, the market and other city details are compared to knights. The feminine image is also characterized as a mother who can give birth. Sometimes she is the poet’s own soul, which thus becomes a temple. Sometimes the worship of the woman is not a heroic choice, but a surrender to irresistible powers.

Do we still have here a mystical experience? The answer remains: yes. In “Stars Outside,” the relationships between the man and the woman are described as yearnings for ecstatic unity with a sacred being, which is symbolized by concrete visions which carry clear mystical traditions. The unity is described as a complete devotion, which demands disconnection from regular earthly life. In some poems, this experience is a continuation of the Jewish tradition.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Apocalyptic Poetry

Apocalyptic Narrative and Thinking

The apocalyptic narrative is an eschatological myth which describes the history of the world from its primordial period until the End of Days.¹ The yearning for a mystical redemption and the belief in the possibility of its coming created a whole literature of apocalyptic visions, describing a collective redemption which will take place after a mythical victory of divine “sons of light” over the “sons of darkness.” Its classical model is the last book of The New Testament, The Book of Revelation, whose Greek name is *Apokalypsis*. In contrast to other eschatological narratives (such as the vision of the End of Days in Isaiah ch. 2), human suffering and cosmic catastrophe take a central role in the narrative. They are an inevitable condition of apocalyptic redemption. Terrible bloodshed and incomprehensible suffering should take place before the arrival of redemption, for the activity of Evil is a necessary, inseparable part of the process of apocalyptic redemption. Apocalyptic thinking can be formulated thus: “In fact to-day is bad, and to-morrow may be worse, but in the day after to-morrow a radical change for the better will certainly happen.”² Apocalyptic thinking and mysticism are connected on the emotional and conceptual levels, so it is not by chance that apocalyptic literature was created in periods when mysticism flourished.

The apocalyptic narrative is not a utopia, for utopias are visions about redemption by human powers, while apocalyptic redemption is a despairing and wild fantasy about super-human and trans-historical powers. It is revealed in the form of a script on a sacred heavenly scroll, telling about unchangeable

1 Collins, *Apocalypse*. On different meanings of the term “apocalypticism” see Boccacini, “Jewish Apocalyptic Tradition.”

2 Licht, “The Teaching of Time,” p. 63. On apocalyptic thinking see also Scholem, “The Messianic Idea,” p. 161.

historical events. The apocalyptic narrative is a war story about a struggle between the powers of Good and Evil. Its heroes are, on the one hand, demonic monsters which represent the oppressing rulers, and, on the other, heavenly creatures whose role is to avenge the suffering of the oppressed, who are the tellers and the addressees of the story. In this context both the redeeming and the Evil powers are mythological, which means that human beings have no chance to interfere in their struggle. The redemption in the End of Days is pictured as a fantastic reality, in which the oppressed — the only survivors of the catastrophe — will enjoy comfort, prosperity, domination, eternal joy and eternal life.

In contrast to the Biblical prophecies, which include moral preaching and warnings which are addressed to the listeners, apocalyptic literature avoids moral judgment and considers its public to be righteous people who suffer from monstrous injustice.³ Apocalyptic literature can be — and was — read as a historiosophy, a deterministic theory about the laws of history, and also as a guide to moral and political behavior. From a moral point of view, any deterministic philosophy is problematic, for morality is not possible without free choice. Apocalyptic thinking considers both the present and the future to be parts of a mythological cosmic chain of events, motivated by powers which are above human control, they are a manifestation of what was already determined. The apocalyptic narrative presupposes that redemption is conditioned by the extreme, unjustified suffering of the righteous, which should have raised a revolt. This suffering thus becomes meaningful and even justified. Apocalyptic narratives can also justify chaos and aggression, for redemption needs a stage of chaos, when powers of aggression burst out and cancel the laws of nature, reason and morality. “Any aggressive act can be justified by a rhetoric of extreme change, which is abundant in ancient apocalypses and reinforced in the new ones.”⁴

The apocalyptic description idealizes the righteous “we” and demonizes the evil. The righteous “we” receive unrealistic promises, such as eternal life and a complete destruction of Evil in the world. The emotional world of the

3 Buber, “Prophecy and Apocalypse,” Uffenheimer, *Zachariah*.

4 Grünwald, “Apocalypse,” p. 24.

apocalyptic narrator is far from wisdom and sanity. He expresses wishful thinking, assumes a fulfillment of fantasies with no effort, and makes megalomaniacal demands for authority. This is why the apocalyptic presentation of reality may seem too colorful, limited, vulgar and irresponsible.⁵

Apocalyptic thinking has two channels of practical interpretation. The first directs us to bear our suffering calmly, accept peacefully the terror and bloodshed, and welcome the necessary evil as a step toward redemption, and the second directs us to create chaos and use aggression and cruelty against our enemies, for this is the only way to achieve our sacred goals. As a theory of historical redemption, apocalyptic thought can then encourage political passivity, on the one hand, and bloodshed as a means to achieve sacred goals, on the other. It can encourage radical moods of vengefulness or righteousness due to its simplistic view of a complicated reality.

The births of apocalyptic moods and movements are generally explained by situations of crisis and anxiety in oppressed peripheral groups, during a time of political struggle between majority and minority groups. In such a situation, a belief in apocalypse is understandable. However, apocalyptic thinking can also be used by a governing body or a periphery group which wishes to justify its uncontrolled political aggression.⁶

Apocalyptic narratives and their characteristic rhetoric have been psychologically explained as expressions of extreme moods of suffering, loss and bereavement⁷ and elsewhere as justifications of the problematic moral meaning of apocalyptic thinking. From this point of view the authenticity of the apocalyptic style in works of literature which describe post-traumatic situations can be judged. It can hardly morally justify a world view which sees suffering, cruelty and evil as an inevitable and even necessary stage on the way to redemption, whether personal or collective. Apocalyptic narratives are then politically and morally problematic if they are interpreted not only as expressions of temporary extreme emotions, but also as expressing political, philosophical and moral

5 Alter, "The Apocalyptic Temper."

6 McGinn, *Apocalyptic Spirituality*, pp. 9-11; Ravitsky, *The Uncovered End*, pp. 111-200; Collins, "Meaning and Significance."

7 Collins, *ibid.*

views which are based on deterministic mythological thinking, and especially if they become a guide for personal behavior and political activities.

In the late 1960s Robert Alter wrote that the flourishing in the USA of apocalyptic literature is completely alien to the spirit of Judaism.⁸ He argued that the apocalypse is a Christian invention, because it is deterministic and therefore immoral. Two years earlier Gunar Böklund attacked post-First World War Expressionism for being a vulgar, infantile, and dangerous representation of human historical reality.⁹ Fifty years before that, in a review on Broderson's Yiddish translation of Blok's "The Twelve," the Yiddish critic Shmuel Niger raised a series of questions, attacking the moral logic of this influential poem, which describes the October Revolution and the bloodshed with which it was accompanied as an apocalyptic event: the poem ends with the redeeming appearance of Jesus, who joins the rag-tag band of Bolshevik guards after one of them kills his own girlfriend and they all shoot Jesus. In an earlier version of this poem the group causes a cosmic fire by their love for Katka. Niger wrote: "How natural and morally inevitable, yes, morally inevitable, is the game, which is intentionally a game of bloodshed, the dark and sacred game of the one who is going to revenge the blood of his beloved girl."¹⁰ It bothered Niger that Blok presented the bloodshed during the October Revolution as morally inevitable. He also found it difficult to understand why in the poem the dog — the symbol of the old world — is more repulsive than the murderer, and why Jesus, the symbol of grace, joins this group of twelve criminals, thus confirming the justice of their deeds. "Is He, the God of Grace, also the God of revenge?" asked Niger.

As for the Jewish or Christian roots of the idea of apocalypse, Alter wrote:

The birth of Christianity from the apocalyptic side of Judaism is a well known historical fact, but is it important to add that apocalypse is for itself a decadent form of Judaism (...) Apocalypse can never and in no way be central for the Jewish vision of history (...) Christianity, however, could never free itself from the apocalyptic basic nature of its beginning.¹¹

8 Alter, "The Apocalyptic Temper"; Rovit, "On the Contemporary Apocalyptic Imagination."

9 Böklund, "Time Must Have a Stop."

10 Niger, "The Revolution and the Poet," p. 13.

11 Alter, *ibid.*, pp. 49, 53.

Following Buber,¹² Alter argued that apocalyptic thinking was a Jewish invention, but Judaism's historical consensus rejected it and accepted the prophet's Messianism, which let man have free choice.

Gershom Scholem suggested a completely different evaluation of Jewish apocalyptic thought. He did acknowledge its anarchistic elements, but described them as belonging to positive Messianic activism and as revolutionary elements in the history of the Jewish people.¹³ Scholem attacked the "denial of the continuity of apocalyptic tradition in Talmudic Judaism by both Christian and Jewish scholars,"¹⁴ arguing that the term "*khevlei mashiakh*" (the pangs of the Messiah's coming) is rooted in ancient Jewish thinking. He found apocalypse "on the double wonderful line of mutual Jewish-Christian influence which continued simultaneously with internal developments in both religions."¹⁵

Today Jewish and non-Jewish scholars are united in the opinion that the apocalyptic view of history was born in Judaism during the second temple period, but was censured by the central Jewish movements in this period and by later rabbinic literature. Apocalyptic writing did not become a genre in canonical Biblical and post-Biblical Jewish literature,¹⁶ and apocalyptic thinking is not characteristic of HAZAL, although it can be traced there. In Christianity this genre became a central tradition: "Apocalypse is the mother of Christian theology."¹⁷ The Book of Revelation, which is the arch-model of this genre, and even the narrative of Jesus' life and death itself, are based on the belief that only suffering can bring redemption.

The Christian establishment, like the Jewish one, was reserved toward apocalyptic political moods, but nevertheless the apocalyptic narrative became central in Christian culture. The story of Jesus moves the apocalypse from the national to the personal level, and West European literature generally continued the apocalyptic narrative as a personal and collective redemption

12 Buber, "Prophecy and Apocalypse."

13 Scholem, "Understanding the Messianic Idea."

14 *Ibid.*, pp. 162-163.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 170.

16 Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, p. 3; Boccacini, "Jewish Apocalyptic Tradition," p. 42.

17 Kaseman, "The Beginnings of Christian Theology," p. 39.

story.¹⁸ Thus apocalyptic motifs are woven throughout European poetry, such as Dante's *Comedia Divina* and European Romantic poems, particularly those of William Blake, as well as in post-First World War Expressionistic poetry. Apocalyptic motifs can also be found in Western prose and philosophy: Herman Melville's novel *Moby Dick* is an example for prose fiction, and Nietzsche's "Antichrist" is an equally influential poetic-philosophical work. The apocalyptic narrative continued to develop in widely varying versions in modern Western culture,¹⁹ including art and cinema: with or without a journey in heaven, with or without a primordial history, various mythological beasts, earthly Messiahs and inner enemies who pretend to be Messiahs, with or without redemption. The last option — an apocalyptic narrative which does not include redemption — is characteristic of modernistic writing. This version, which is more pessimistic and less illusory than the original one, is in fact a rejection of the belief in redemption conditioned by catastrophe and suffering. In the moral context it is important, then, to distinguish between different versions of the apocalyptic narrative, because they have different meanings.

The different moral meanings of various apocalyptic writings result not only from their different narratives, but also from their differences in style. In The Book of Revelation, for example, the monstrous actions of the evil powers is described in extreme rhetoric, unprecedented in the visions of Ezekiel, Daniel and the contemporary Heikhalot literature, despite the similarities among the texts in other aspects. This wild style can encourage extreme moods more than the relatively moderate style of ancient Jewish apocalyptic literature. Similarly, the atmosphere of despair in the apocryphal Book of Baruch, which is also a description of an apocalypse, does not offer the reader easy consolation or justification of aggression, as does the Book of Revelation.²⁰

18 McGinn, *Apocalypticism in the Western Tradition*.

19 Kermode, "Apocalypse and the Modern"; Wilder, "The Rhetoric of Ancient and Modern Apocalyptic."

20 Licht, "Baruch's Despair."

The Russian Background

Apocalyptic thinking and affiliation to the sources of Christian apocalypticism is one of the prominent characteristics of theological and political Russian literature and thought during the first quarter of the 20th century. Unlike Russian Orthodox Christianity, Russian apocalyptic literature emphasized the collective-national aspect, the hero of the narrative being the Russian people. The Mongol-Tatar occupation of Russia (1223-1480), a continuing trauma in the Russian collective memory, became a model according to which the present was understood. This concept deepened in the 20th century, following the Russian defeat in the Russo-Japanese War (1905). “Yellow faced” became a description of a demonic enemy who threatened to destroy Russia.

Apocalypticism has deeper roots and richer tradition in religious Russian literature than in Western European literature.²¹ A possible explanation for this is the high value of suffering in Russian culture.²² Apocalyptic thinking can be found in 19th-century Russian literature by writers who wished to revive the non-European Russian tradition, such as Nikolay Gogol, Fiodor Dostoevsky (particularly in his novel *Devils*, 1871), the later Vladimir Soloviev and Konstantin Leontiev. In this context, redemption was conditioned on the overcoming of the West by the East and the revival of the original Eastern Russian spirit, whose survival was endangered by the West. The fall of the Russian Empire and the anarchy which dominated Russia during the Revolutions of 1905 and 1907 strengthened the feeling of the coming End and the yearnings for a mystical redemption, thus creating an intense apocalyptic atmosphere. Nietzschean ideas like “In order to build a temple an old one should be destroyed” also contributed to the popularity of apocalyptic thinking during this period. The apocalyptic vision guided the “scientific” Marxist thinking, which emphasized the “iron laws” of economical processes and the need of aggressive revolution in order to redeem the proletarian class from its oppression. This fact enabled central thinkers like Nikolay Berdiaev to view communism

21 Bethea, *The Shape of Apocalypse*, pp. 12-31; Dunken, *Russian Messianism*.

22 Rancour-Laferier, *The Slave Soul of Russia*.

as a Messianic redemption, and the October revolution as an apocalyptic Gog and Magog war between Good and Evil.

At the turn of the 20th century and during the whole Russian Silver Age apocalyptic literature was written by many writers and poets, including Fiodor Sologub, Dmitry Merezhkovsky, Valery Briusov, Andrey Biely, Aleksandr Blok, Viacheslav Ivanov and Leonid Andreev, whose stories and dramas gained an enormous popularity in Yiddish.²³ This genre flourished in Russian Symbolism and was continued by post-Symbolist literature, as one can learn from Aleksei Kruchionyk's essay "Apocalypsis in Russian Literature." (1923) After the October Revolution, apocalyptic thinking continued to be expressed in the poetry and prose of Osip Mandel'shtam and Mikhail Bulgakov and later in the mystical writings of Daniil Andreyev.

The alarm call "Pan-Mongolism!" which opens Vladimir Soloviev's poem of that title (1894), echoes in the whole of early-20th century Russian poetry, sometimes in other formulations, such as in the title of Merezhkovsky's essay "*Kham* [Noah's son, symbol of vulgarity and aggression] is Coming Soon" (1906). The contemporary historical situation of Russia was described as a stage in an apocalyptic process by Andrey Biely in his essay "Apocalypse in Russian Poetry" (1905), by Viacheslav Ivanov in his "Apocalypse and Society" (1905) and by Vasily Rozanov in his collection of essays *Apocalypse of Our Times* (1917-1918).

Blok and Biely inherited Soloviev's apocalyptic thinking, and they connected it to pre- and post-Revolutionary events. Remizov's Symbolist legends (such as "The Devil's Story," in 1907) were very popular, contributing to the spread of the myth. The apocalyptic understanding of the Revolution appears in Vladimir Mayakovsky's first collection of poetry, *I* (1913), in his lyrical drama *Vladimir Mayakovsky: a Tragedy* (1913) and in his poem "The 13th Emissary." Maximilian Voloshin and Osip Mandel'shtam described the First World War as an apocalyptic event. Vasily Rozanov and Boris Pasternak rejected the idea of sacrifice as a condition for redemption and developed a theory of dramatic redemption by the individual's joy of life. Apocalyptic motifs can be found also

23 Dunken, *Russian Messianism*, pp. 49-61; Hackel, *The Poet and the Revolution*, pp. 12-31; Ciorean, *The Apocalyptic Symbolism of Andrej Bielyj*; Hellman, *Poets of Hope and Despair*; Katsis, "Apocalypse in the Silver Age."

in Russian early-20th century painting, for example in the works of Vrubel, Somov, Baksht and Kamensky. Again and again in Russian Silver Age literature we find the *bledny kon'* (pale horse) from the Book of Revelation 6:8, on which death is riding. A citation of this sentence from the New Testament appears as a motto to Briusov's poem "The Pale Horse" (1905), which describes the appearance of this legendary symbolic horse in the modern metropolis.²⁴ "The iron rod," a repeated metaphor, in the Book of Revelation, for the power and inevitable victory of divine justice over Evil (Revelation 2:27, 12:5, the origin of this metaphor is Psalms 2:9), often appears in early-20th century Russian political discourse and literature as a symbol of the cruel but just historical powers which will lead Russia to its political redemption from suffering. An example is Blok's untitled poem dated December 3, 1914, which begins with the words, "It was already waved above us — the iron rod" and ends with a storm which "penetrates into the mysteries of fear/ carrying us to the azure./ Here is [our] designed way."²⁵

Biely's essay can give an idea about the centrality of this theme in the mid-1910s. The essay opens with citations from Soloviev's "Pan-Mongolism" and from Blok's "Poems on the Beautiful Lady" (1904) then discusses the enormous influence of Soloviev's apocalyptic ideas, particularly of his lecture "On the End of World History," on his contemporary generation, and on the way in which contemporary historical events, especially the Russo-Japanese War, confirmed these ideas.²⁶

Elements which had earlier not existed or had been less central now entered into modern Russian apocalyptic literature. First, music and art became the heralds of Dionysian anarchistic revolution through the influence of Nietzsche's "The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music" (1872). Music and the arts were seen as joyfully motivating the apocalyptic catastrophe to bring redemption. Second, the importance of the subconscious became clear, as the Russian symbolist apocalyptic narrative discusses not only historical and cosmic events, but also events which take place in the deep unconscious levels of

24 Briusov, *Selected Writings*, pp. 192-193.

25 Blok, *Complete Works*, vol 3 p. 223. On the metaphor of the iron rod in this poem see also Hackel, *The Poet and the Revolution*, p. 143.

26 Biely, "Apocalypse in Russian Poetry."

the poet's soul and human soul in general. Third, the role of the poet changes significantly. Here the source of authority of the apocalyptic vision is not the divine herald, but the poet who is endowed with prophetic-mystical powers. The narrator does not only tell what he has seen, but also takes a part, sometimes a main part, in the visionary story. He himself sometimes plays the role of the redeemer. A fourth change is the new mixture of times: the apocalyptic plot is not described as a mythological legendary chain of events, but as a mixture of fantasy with realistic details, sometimes taken from modern urban life. Realistic descriptions of storm or fire symbolize cosmic destruction.²⁷

In Russian apocalyptic literature the moral problems which arise from apocalyptic thinking have three additional aspects. The first is the centrality of the Antichrist motif.²⁸ The Antichrist is a treacherous inner enemy which pretends to be the people's redeemer or Messiah, but is in fact a representative of Evil on earth, who should be rejected or annihilated, if possible, as a contribution to the mythical war against Evil. This idea enables one to turn hate and revenge from a powerful external enemy toward an inner, weaker one, and to make him a scapegoat, an object of justified hatred and revenge. In Russia the title "Antichrist" was given to Peter the Great, to Napoleon, Lenin, Stalin, the Free masons, the Jews and the bourgeoisie. In Russian literature there are Antichrist lands and cities: Egypt, Babylon, Rome, St. Petersburg. The inner powers of evil were sometimes represented as Mongols, Japanese or just "yellow-faced," in homage to the neighboring enemy which had defeated Russia. The second (which is specific to post-revolutionary Russian literature) is the understanding of the post-revolutionary situation as a post-apocalyptic redemption era, which was achieved by the necessary bloodshed during the periods of the First World War, the Revolutions and the post-Revolution civil war on the border of Poland. Such understanding enabled one to justify the cruelty and the inhuman bloodshed committed at this time by people who later became part of the ruling class.

The third aspect is the principle of paradox which organizes the fictional reality, erasing the opposition between evil-doers and the righteous and even

27 This is the case in Blok's "The Twelve," Biely's "Homeland," and Gorodetsky's "Rus," among others.

28 Molchanov, *Antichrist*; Evorsky, *Antichrist*.

between catastrophe and redemption. Redeeming sacredness, on the one hand, and vulgar aggression, on the other, forms a paradoxical unity. Aggression here is not just a step on the way to ward redemption; it is a redeeming power by itself. The revolutionist or terrorist is a transformation of a righteous man or a saint, ready to die like Jesus for the sacred homeland. An example can be found in V. Ropshin's (Boris Viktorovich Savenikov's) novel, *The Pale Horse* (1909). The main heroes of this novel are two terrorist revolutionaries who murder innocent people. One of them does so because of religious motivations; the other is simply a professional killer. Is there an essential difference between them? In 1909 this was still an open question, but in later, post-Revolutionary Russian apocalyptic literature, the tone of justification became louder and louder.

The Jewish-Russian Background

In November 22, 1916, the writer and folklorist An-sky (Shlomo Rapaport) wrote from Moscow to his friend, the actress Roza Nikolaevna Ettinger:

The coachman who took me from the railway station told me with deep conviction that the [First World] War will last three years and three months. — Why? — Thus it was said in the Scriptures. — Where? — I do not know, but it was said there. It was also said that three great Emperors will fight. One will die a natural death, the second will die from a canon ball, and the third will win. Then, when peace will come, there will be an inner war everywhere, which will last four years. Many people will die, a few will survive, there will be much crop but the simple people will be hungry, for there will be no one to reap it. Exactly from the *Apocalypsis* [the Book of Revelation].²⁹

The Jewish writer did not find it necessary to explain to his addressee, a Jewish actress, his concluding remark about the Book of Revelation and about apocalyptic tales. Three months later, in a letter which An-Sky sent to the same Roza Ettinger from Chertkov, where he was traveling in order to collect Jewish folkloristic materials, he wrote: "Most of the legends dealt with the theme of the

²⁹ An-Sky, "Letters to Roza Ettinger," p. 38.

Messiah [and here is an example]: after the Hassidic Rabbi Israel of Rozhansk was released from the Russian prison, one of the Hassidim was crying. When asked for the reason he said: ‘I believed that out *tsadik* is the Messiah, and I thought that if he was imprisoned it was a sign that ‘the pangs of the Messiah’ have begun. When I heard that he was tortured, I thought: Good! Let it be! Soon the abscess will burst! And here... he was released. The *tsadik* returned and the Messiah disappeared.’³⁰

The Hassid, like the Russian coachman, believed that redemption — in his case that of the Jewish people — would not arrive without an earlier step of extreme suffering on the part of the *tsadik*, who to him was the hidden Messiah. An-sky the scholar and writer had special interest in folk tales about apocalyptic redemption: he himself wrote the story “Ten Signs of the Messiah” (written circa 1910-1911), an apocalyptic piece of modern prose which discusses the suffering and destruction which are necessary for redemption.³¹

In this traumatic historical period, apocalyptic thinking had a cross-cultural presence, being common among Russians and Jews, intellectuals and simple people. In his introduction to Aharon Tseitlin’s long poem “Metatron” (1922) the critic Dovid Aryeh Friedman wrote: “We live now in an apocalyptic time. Maybe this is the most apocalyptic time which has ever been.”³² Jewish writers and artists were very much interested in building bridges between Judaism and Christianity, despite growing and increasingly aggressive anti-Semitism.

Demonstrating this phenomenon are the entries under “apocalypse,” “ancient Jewish apocalyptic literature” and “New Jewish apocalyptic literature” in the second volume of the monumental Jewish encyclopedia in Russian, which appeared during the years 1908-1915.³³ These items extend over 44 columns (in comparison to half a column under “apocalypse” in the 11-volume *Short Jewish Encyclopedia*, Jerusalem, 1976). In the Brokgaus-Efron Encyclopedia, the essay under “Apocalypse” emphasizes the Jewish sources and character of the Book of

30 Ibid., p. 40.

31 An-Sky, *Complete Works*, pp. 120-135.

32 Zeitlin, *Metatron*, p.1.

33 “Apocalypse” was written by Fadei Zelinsky, the entries about Jewish apocalypse were written by Jewish scholar David Ginzburg (Horace Ginzburg’s son).

Revelation. The entries about Jewish apocalyptic literature stress the continuity and richness of this literature and the Jewish-Christian mutual influence.

It is not difficult to understand why Jewish intellectuals in Russia who wished to integrate into Russian culture tried to emphasize the Jewish sources of Christian apocalyptic literature and the inherent continuity of Jewish apocalypse. Jewish writers and artists, who already considered themselves part of Russian culture, contributed to this genre in the 1920s and early 1930s, because apocalyptic work was seen as a natural bridge between Jewish writing and European modernism.

Apocalyptic poetry in Yiddish flourished during the entire first half of the 20th century, and especially between the two World Wars,³⁴ and the crop of apocalyptic Yiddish long poems during this period is astounding. For Yiddish writers this was “a highway for the expression of their spiritual world and for the creation of literature which could be Jewish by its contents and modern by its character.”³⁵

It is not by chance that the apocalyptic genre was so popular in Yiddish literature. The need to blur the borders between Jewish and European-Christian cultures, including the absorption of Christian motifs into Jewish literature, was more easily satisfied in Yiddish than in Hebrew literature, which was more separatist. Yiddish, more than Hebrew, literature also satisfied popular needs, as demonstrated by the enthusiastic reception of Stanislaw Przysbyszewsky and Leonid Andreev in Yiddish literature and theatre.

Avraham Novershtern pointed out “an essential hidden aspect” in Yiddish apocalyptic literature, writing:

The whole moral dimension is not emphasized [by Yiddish poets]. In a clear modernistic vein they create characters and situations which are “beyond Good and Evil,” people to whom the regular criteria of moral judgment does not apply. (...) they postpone the severity of any moral verdict, for good or for evil.³⁶

34 Novershtern, *The Lure of Twilight*.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 28.

Can modernism be the only explanation for the moral problem of Yiddish apocalyptic poetry? Jewish literature at the time was coping with unprecedented collective traumas and with the need to give them meaning, and the apocalyptic narrative was a natural frame for the expression of shock and embarrassment characteristic of post-traumatic situations. Jewish apocalyptic emotional reactions were natural in a cultural context saturated with apocalyptic thinking, which gave rise to contemporary Hebrew literature as well.

Anti-Apocalypse in Bialik's Poetry

Who among the Hebrew poets adopted the apocalyptic fashion without criticism, and who was sensitive to its problematic moral aspect?

Hayim Nahman Bialik's poem in Yiddish, "The Last Word" (1901),³⁷ was the first modern Jewish literary work which used the Jewish-Christian apocalyptic tradition for writing about the historical present.³⁸ In this poem, Bialik used characteristic apocalyptic rhetoric as well as images and terms which allude to Jewish and Christian apocalyptic sources. The poem is a prophecy of cosmic destruction. "And it [the world] will all be burnt in the earthquake/ and only ash will remain of it (...) Mountains and valleys will tremble." The catastrophe here is not a result of external evil, but of processes of degeneration and senility which take place within the Jewish spirit. The evil is to be found inside, in the indifference and dullness which gradually turn Judaism paralytic or comparable to the living dead. The destruction is a result of the nation's inability to understand its situation, awaken and act. Like the Russian Symbolists, Bialik saw destruction as a process of inner degeneration and death, and like them he described a two-faced redeemer: both merciful and cruel.³⁹

In contrast to the Russian Symbolists, however, Bialik did not envision a redemption by superhuman powers which would rise out of cruelty and bloodshed. Moreover, in contrast to the whole apocalyptic tradition, he did

37 Bialik, *Poems in Yiddish*, p. 47.

38 Novershtern, *The Lure of Twilight*, pp. 28-32; Shamir, "Bialik's Poems of Wrath."

39 Hackel, *The Poet and the Revolution*, p. 158.

not envision redemption for his reading public, but for their oppressors: in this poem he wrote that the redemption of the whole world will not include the Jews: “The world will be filled with light — only you will remain slaves and will not win even one drop of light.” For Bialik, redemption can result from spiritual awakening and readiness to suffer. These are the characteristics of the poet-prophet, who in this poem is very similar to Jesus: “I have a heart which bears the illnesses of the other,/ which twists with the pain of the stranger,/ and will be burnt in the other’s hell.” But the poet cannot bring redemption; it cannot come from without. The poem ends with a bitter acceptance of the forthcoming destruction.

In spite of its clear apocalyptic character, Bialik gave this poem the subtitle *nevi’ish* (prophetic), maybe in order to stress the difference between the apocalyptic model, which was current in contemporary Russian literature, and the Jewish moral character of his historical vision of the end of Judaism. Acquaintance with the model, however, places this difference in the foreground. In this poem Bialik directed his moral claims at his Jewish readers. He did not promise them revenge and compensation for their sufferings, he did not present them as innocent, suffering righteous people, and he did not attribute superhuman demonic powers to any external evil. For him evil was to be found within ourselves, and its roots are laziness, dullness and emotional degeneration.

What we have here is a revolutionary anti-apocalyptic poem. It is revolutionary not only because Bialik rejects the ending redemption, as some other Yiddish poets also did later, but mainly because he rejected here the whole system of apocalyptic thinking, which views the suffering minority as the victim of monstrous supernatural evil. Instead he operated moral self-criticism. It is, in fact, a “prophetic” literary work in spite of its apocalyptic elements, because it does not aim at the encouragement of those who see themselves as suffering and discriminated against, but calls for moral self-reproach and demands radical inner change. It is interesting to compare Bialik’s inner moral demand in this poem with Y.L Peretz’ stance in his “The Golden Chain” (1907), which is optimistic in the Nietzschean vein.

In his poems Bialik often adopted traditional European poetical forms in order to change them and turn them into what he considered to be a Jewish discourse. Here he did the same with the apocalyptic tradition which was the

Russian contemporary fashion by emptying it of its basic presuppositions. Bialik here revealed his sensitivity to the moral problem of apocalyptic thinking and his opposition to its characteristic moral stance.

Among the poems which Bialik wrote in the years 1902-1909 is a group of apocalyptic poems, the clearest examples of which are "I Know in a Misty Night" and "Call the Serpents." The others are "The Dead of the Desert," "My Light Was Not Unearned," "On the Slaughter," "Last Year's Stalks," "A Word," "The Scroll of Fire" and "When Days Become Longer." In some of these poems there are allusions to the Book of Revelation: "A Word" ends with the metaphor of the angel of death "riding on our shoulders," alluding to death riding on its pale horse. In "I Know in a Misty Night" the poet's wrath and the addressee's grief are transformed into cosmic powers of destruction which change the laws of nature and turn the sun into "a spot of innocent blood," referring to Revelation 6:12, in which the moon turns into blood. This poem ends with the revenge of God, who holds a big sword in his hand, alluding to Revelation 19:15-16, in which Jesus' mouth is compared to a sharp sword with which he will hit the nations and an iron scepter is introduced. In "My Light Was Not Unearned," the iron scepter is exchanged for "the hammer of my great troubles" which explodes the poet's heart into pieces and provides redemption for the readers due to his suffering. The feminine image of a redeeming divinity, which appears in Revelation, ch. 12, appears also in "The Scroll of Fire."

Like "The Last Word," some of these poems also contain visions of the End of Days in an apocalyptic style, describing the mythical end of history, treating the present as doomed to complete annihilation. The expression *kets ha-olam* (End of Days) appears in "I Know in a Misty Night," and the theme of the coming end is clear in the ending of "Word": "And with fires of revival on our lips, and with shout joys and plays/ we shall hop to the grave." The world is here pictured as one big collective grave to which the Jewish people is deliberately marching.

Destruction has mythological dimensions in these poems, in which the laws of nature are changed and the cosmos is transformed into chaos. In "The Dead of the Desert" the revolt of the dead brings about a cosmic desert storm, which turns the whole cosmos in a fantastic circular movement: "And the desert bitterly roared/ and it waved in a boiling mire/ all the depths of hell and the height

of world into one muddle.”⁴⁰ In “The Scroll of Fire” God destroys not only the temple but also his heavenly world: “Did God kick his throne and break his crown into pieces?”⁴¹ The mythical annihilation is pictured in this long poem not as a single event, but as a power of nature: the monstrous river of death attracts and kills the boys and the girls, and almost kills the hero too. In “On the Slaughter” the Jewish blood becomes a mythological destructive power which will puncture the world and decompose from within “all the foundations of the earth.” In “A Word” the Jewish people is in a state of cosmic chaos in which dawn and dusk are confused: “And whether the sun has shined for us or set - / and whether it has for ever disappeared./ And great is the chaos around and very terrible is the chaos/ and none refuge.” In “Call the Serpents” the storm in the spiritual desert causes cosmic changes: “And the desert will tremble and your rock will turn aside under you.” In “As Days Go Long,” those who are sick with degeneration and ennui are disappointed that cosmic changes have not occurred: “He will see that the sea has not run away — and he’ll yawn./ and he will see that the stars have not moved from their places — and he’ll yawn.”

The total destruction is more finely described in “Last Year’s Stalks”: “And all last year’s stalks will be burnt at night.” Here the destruction seems to be a result of the seasonal maintenance of a garden, but the gardener’s spade and pruning-hook act as an independent demon of destruction, like the apocalyptic iron rod. They “throw dust” and “cut the plants” (a metaphor for becoming irreligious, from the story about the four who entered the mystical garden). The “naïve, beautiful girl” who appears suddenly at the end of this poem in order to burn the dry dead stalks has two faces, one destructive and the other redeeming. She burns the old, dry, dead stalks, the old world. Like the Russian Symbolist poets, Bialik used realistic details, such as pruning the garden, a fire, or a storm as symbols of mythic destruction.

The emotional effects of these poems are similar to the characteristic frightful effects of apocalyptic literature. In “The Dead of the Desert,” the desert itself is full of anger. It wishes “to avenge once and for all its loneliness from God”; in “The Scroll of Fire” God is characterized again and again as “God of

40 Bialik, *Poems 1899-1934*, p. 124.

41 *Ibid.*, p. 222.

revenge,” and one of the heroes represents the drives of hatred and revenge, with whom He wants to sweep up the whole group. In “On the Slaughter” Jewish blood decomposes the world as a revenge of what He has done to Jews. In “I Know in a Misty Night” the anger of the poet and the grief of the addressees transforms the Jewish suffering into a mythical power which changes the sun into a spot of blood and awakens God’s revenge.

To whom are these extreme emotions directed? Only in “On the Slaughter,” which was written as a reaction to the Kishinev pogrom in 1903, is the anger directed outside, to the non-Jewish world. As we have seen, in “The Last Word” it is directed inside, and the same is true of “A Word,” “The Dead of the Desert,” and “The Scroll of Fire.” In all of these poems the powers which endanger the existence of Judaism are internal: the Jews themselves are attracted to false paths to illusory redemption. Bialik blames the Jews themselves for the forthcoming catastrophes which endanger their spiritual existence.

Bialik also totally rejects the idea of catastrophe, innocent suffering and cruelty as conditions for national redemption. None of his apocalyptic poems describe the destruction of the Evil in the world as a necessary step on the way to redemption. “On the Slaughter,” “A Word,” “I Know in a Misty Night” and “Call the Serpents” each end with a total destruction, with no redemption. Other poems negate the redemptive destruction narrative by introducing expectations for redemption which are refuted later in the poem: the chaos raised by the dead of the desert ends with nothing. They declare: “We are the last generation of slavery and the first of redemption” (which became a Zionist slogan), but the end of the poem refutes this pretension. Bialik’s “When the Days Become Long” is a parody of the vain expectations for Messianic-cosmic redemption. In “The Scroll of Fire” God’s wrath and the revengeful prophecy of the boy with the wrathful eyes bring only destruction and death. In “I Know in a Misty Night” the shriek of the suffering and the oppressed will halt the redemption: “The injury which was done to you will stand until the last generation/ and with no voice and speech will cry to hell and to heaven/ and will delay the redemption of the world.”

In “Last Year’s Stalks” the cruel cutting and burning of the plants is explained by the speaker as a necessary act for the continuation of the garden’s life, but the poet describes the act of cutting as inhuman, and the burning of

the stalks as done by “a naïve girl” who does not understand what she is doing. Bialik did not share the contemporary Revolutionary enthusiasm. This is clear both from his poetry — “The Lake,” for example — and from his ex-literary expressions, in which he sharply criticized aggression and cruelty as means to political achievements.⁴²

Bialik powerfully expressed the extreme emotions from which apocalypses are born, the drives of revenge and the impulse to destroy the whole world and oneself, but he clearly negated the possibility that from such drives a redemption could be born. In “On the Slaughter,” the blood of the small child will perhaps destroy the world, but it will not bring redemption. Redemption in “The Scroll of Fire” appears as Morning Star, a feminine, tender, merciful, delicate image, the opposite of the wrathful, destructive God who appears at the beginning of the poem.

Zionism as an Apocalyptic Event

It was not by chance that Shlonsky chose to open his collection of translations of Russian poetry with Soloviev’s “Pan-Mongolism” and to close it with N. Niezlobin’s “His Sacred Blood.”⁴³ The first poem prophesies an apocalyptic catastrophe in Russia, the second describes Pushkin’s death as a cosmic catastrophe. For Shlonsky, modern Russian poetry was an apocalyptic literature. The influence of Russian culture on Zionism included an apocalyptic understanding of early 20th century history.

In Hebrew poetry which was written in Eretz-Israel during the 1920s-1930s, Zionism was understood as a Messianic mystical redemption, even by poets of divergent political opinions.⁴⁴ Avraham Shlonsky, Yitzhak Lamdan, Ezra Zoussman, Uri Zvi Greenberg and others described the suffering of the Zionist pioneers as a necessary step on the way to the miracle of national redemption. Such a view was shared by Zionist poets whose cultural background was not Russian.

42 Bar-Yosef, “Bialik and the Russian Revolutions.”

43 Shlonsky and Goldberg, *Russian Poetry*, pp. 1-2, 175-176.

44 Hever, *In the Captivity of Utopia*.

In fact, the most clearly apocalyptic poet in this period was Greenberg,⁴⁵ who could not read Russian. He moved to Hebrew poetry after writing and editing in Yiddish, which explains his apocalyptic background. He may have been acquainted with Russian revolutionary poetry through his membership in the *Eigens* (Ours) and *Khaliastra* (bunch, gang) groups in Kiev during the late 1910s.⁴⁶ For Greenberg, redemption was a realistic political program whose symbolic poetic expression should make the reader join the ideological stance.

Greenberg, like Russian mystical poets, expected redemption to come from the East, which means a rejection of the corrupt Western European culture. Greenberg unequivocally believed that bloodshed was a necessary step on the way to redemption. Blood was, for him, a symbol of vitality and revival. One of the poems in his cycle "A Legionnaire's Vision," published in 1928, begins with the words: "Blood will pour out in Jerusalem/ it will irrigate ragged capes/ and heal every divot of earth, which has become ill through grief."⁴⁷ As in Bialik's "On the Slaughter," here too the blood is a supernatural power which is able to cause cosmic cataclysm. In Bialik's poem, however, blood can only destroy the world, while for Greenberg it can redeem it.

Related to this comparison, it is interesting to consider Avraham Ben-Yitzhak's unpublished rhymed fragment, which was written on April 24, 1919: "Blood calls blood/ transgress your borders/ from the abysses of your fountains/ the creator will rise."⁴⁸ Here too the blood is a mythical being, with primordial chaotic abysses (in the plural!), and from which God the creator will be born. In this text the blood is a condition not only for redemption, but even for the mere existence of the world. It is the arch-element on which life is based.

More than any other Hebrew poet, Greenberg gave attention to the Antichrist motif. In his poetry, like in Russian poetry, the Antichrist is collective: he

45 On apocalypse in Greenberg's poetry see Granach, "Redemption and Kingdom"; Sahpira, "Greenberg — Apocalypse Now," Shavit, *Mythologies of the Right Parties*; Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse*; Beck, "Prophecy"; Minz, *Destruction*, pp. 143-172; Novershtern, *The Lure of Twilight*, pp. 167-179.

46 Ertel, *Khalistra*.

47 Greenberg, *Complete Works*, vol. 2 p. 28.

48 Ben-Yitzhak, *Poems*, p. 29.

represents the Diaspora Jews who are “spit upon until wet by the gentiles; the indifferent, self-satisfied Jewish bourgeoisie, the mercantile mentality of Jews in Eretz-Israel — all these are a band of traitors whose heart is extinguished, your leaders-misleaders/ eating of the Messiah every day and drinking Him in their goblets.”⁴⁹ The opening poem of the cycle “A Legionnaire’s Vision” is dedicated to the Antichrist. He is the inner enemy, who threatens “the brothers” with “a hidden deceit and a word of flattery.” He is “the ancient snake” who appeared in “our shining home” dressed in bourgeois, decadent trousers.⁵⁰ The clear distinction between the “shining” sons of light and wicked evil, characteristic to apocalyptic literature, is fully kept here.

In the book *A Zone of Defense and Address of the Son of Blood* (1929), the poet directs his list of charges to the Zionist leaders, accusing them of wearing masks over their satanic treachery: “for my nose smelled/ the smell of your leaders’ *bigdam* (clothes/treachery) and the impurity of their lips — / your shepherds are traitors and they lead you astray/ and you do not know yet/ who is the Satan on your threshold!”⁵¹ The enthusiastic adoption of apocalyptic thinking in Greenberg’s poetry falls into line with his understanding of Zionism as a total revolution, which for the achievements of its goals should use Totalitarian methods like those used in Soviet Russia.⁵²

Collective redemption through destruction and suffering is a main theme in Alterman’s “The Joy of the Poor,” “Plague Poems,” and “City of the Dove,” in which, in distinction to “Stars Outside” and its personal poetry, the Jewish and world historical situation is central.⁵³ Arpali in his book on “The Joy of the Poor” denied that it was on history and wrote that it describes “a situation of coping with death in a war of survival whose result is predetermined.”⁵⁴ In fact, the fear of the End of Days, a metaphor for the end of Jewish history, is common to both Alterman and Bialik. In *The Joy of the Poor* the word *kets*

49 Greenberg, *Complete Works*, vol. 2 p. 140.

50 *Ibid.*, p. 9.

51 *Ibid.*, p. 140.

52 Shavit, *The Mythologies of the Right*, p.193.

53 On apocalypse in Alterman’s “The Joy of the Poor” see Shavit, “Apocalypse in ‘The Joy of the Poor’”; Natahn, “Alterman”; Shalev, “Alterman’s ‘The Joy of the Poor.’”

54 Arpali, *Alterman*, p. 26.

(total end) is repeated ten times. The same word appears in “City of the Dove” as “this feeling of *ketz* (...) that light dizziness of groundlessness.”⁵⁵

Like Bialik, Alterman too described the “End” as a mythological cosmic destruction which will change the laws of nature. For example, in one of the “Plague Poems,” fear results in all of nature being thrown into chaos: “The fear gave sign, short but omnipotent/ and horses stood on two like in a dance/ and bonds were disconnected and everything was rolled in ruins,/ and man and cattle were devoured — together or in heaps.” Storm and fire, lightning and wind are transformed here into symbolic pictures of cosmic destruction. Alterman’s tendency to describe redemption through mythological storms can be traced already in “Stars Outside.” In the poem “A Souvenir for the Ways,” the beloved ways scratch the poet like giant beasts and leave a scar of fire on him.⁵⁶ In “The Fire,” the fire which throws the whole city and the whole world into chaos also brings holiday and redemption. The alarm warning of disaster is compared by Alterman to an ancient goddess, abundant with love, who is standing erect on the burning roofs.⁵⁷ In “Storm on the Threshold,” the feminine divine image representing “whatever was incurably proud and beautiful” appears from within the primordial storm which lays bare chasms of black night.⁵⁸ Alterman described the Tel-Aviv street as a war arena, and the street itself as “the fighter, the great Whale/ the bright conqueror.”⁵⁹

Supernatural frightful elements are included in “The Joy of the Poor” in scenes of the Woman’s death: “Tonight the bird bitterly cried,/ as if they came to take his soul./ Tonight the mirror flew from your hand,/ tonight your dress was torn as in a funeral/ and you sat down with an evil heart to stitch the tear/ and lo the needle was wrapped with blood.”⁶⁰ The balladic impression is intended to create an apocalyptic reality of mysterious, mythological destruction and redemption.

55 Alterman, *City of the Dove*, p. 34.

56 Alterman, *Poems of Long Ago*, p. 25.

57 Ibid., pp. 26-28.

58 Ibid., pp. 82-83.

59 Ibid., p. 93.

60 Ibid., p. 206.

In “City of the Dove,” Alterman described with terrifying pictures of collective destruction the period of struggle for the foundation of the Israeli state. For example, in the opening stanza of the poem “A Night of Face to Face,”⁶¹ an illegal ship which brought refugees from Europe is compared to a legendary horse-like boat (similar to the Pale Horse from Revelation) on which the whole nation is riding to an isle whose dimensions are very small (making a reference to Eretz-Israel): “Wild goats live on high mountains/ but our nation rides on a wooden boat./ In a stormy night we were broken to pieces/ against an island whose length and width are two parasangs.” Even the meeting between the local Israelis and the refugees is compared here to a life-and-death war: “We feel their breath, their fear/ the moan of their frail and sick body/ but also their palm which closes over our throat.”⁶²

Alterman’s frequent use of the word “iron” and of iron weapons as metaphors alludes to the “iron rod,” God’s just weapon in Revelation. The need to destroy and kill an inner enemy is present in “Stars Outside,” even in “Eternal Meeting” (which is a sort of manifest). The poet encourages the feminine addressee, the redemptive Lady, to be merciless, to catch and torture him and all her other suitors, and even to let him fall with a wounded head under the wheels of trains in order to win her flower — the redemptive joy.

Feelings of aggression, hatred, and revenge play a central role in “The Joy of the Poor.” Alterman wrote there: “Let us not forget what should not be forgotten/ let us not forgive what should not be forgiven.”⁶³ In his poem “A Prayer of Revenge” he wrote: “give me hatred grey as a sack/ and too heavy to bear by two.”⁶⁴ In this cycle the “enemies” whom the poet wishes to take revenge on are the offenders of the wife-daughter, who destroyed her beauty.

In “Plague Poems” the father and son must take revenge upon a stranger: the son even gives up his life in order to bring redemption. In understanding the enemy as an inner element which should be annihilated as a condition for redemption, Alterman, like Greenberg, continues the tradition of Russian apocalyptic literature.

61 Alterman, *The Dove City*, p. 16.

62 *Ibid.*, p. 26.

63 *Ibid.*, p. 197.

64 *Ibid.*, p. 199.

The influence of Russian Symbolism on Alterman's poetry is shown also in descriptions of destruction and redemption which can be simultaneously understood as historical, personal and metaphysical. Destruction and redemption can represent a love story, the devotion of the artist to beauty, his desperate need for joy and vitality and the foundation of the Israeli state. These meanings can intertwine in one poem or be spread over a series of poems in the same cycle. Following Russian Symbolism and Bialik, Alterman's symbol of redemption is a mythological anonymous feminine being, whom the poet worships unto death. In Alterman's last poem in "Plague Poems," she is wrapped with light and has trembling eyelashes, like Morning Star in Bialik's "The Scroll of Fire" (see ch.6). Alterman, like the Russian Symbolists and Bialik, uses descriptions of events, storms, and fires which become cosmic catastrophes as symbols of historical dramatic events. The image of the redeeming woman is often a mythological symbol of the Jewish nation itself.

However, Alterman's attitude to apocalyptic thinking is different from both Bialik's and Greenberg's. Unlike Bialik, Alterman did believe in the birth of redemption from catastrophe. In "Stars Outside," he had already described the redeeming mythological woman as "lighted by the brightness of her enemies/ for my God has passed through your sleep," indicating that redemption will arrive only after a cruel war of survival. Alterman described this war with mythological symbols, but like the Russian symbolists he knew that the "sword" would be held by human beings. His use of the apocalyptic myth emphasizes that this is a war between Light and Darkness, a no-choice war, of survival at any cost. The miraculous redemption is not eternal life but mere survival, and it does not arrive from above but is brought about by the fighters themselves. The death and burial of the mother in "The Joy of the Poor," like the death of the son in "Plague Poems," is the inevitable price of national survival. The condition of redemption is not family loyalty but the understanding that members of the family should be sacrificed. Unlike Bialik, Alterman accepted the possibility that chaos, aggression and suffering are a necessary stage on the way to redemption, an indivisible part of it, and therefore no less sacred than the rest.

Like Greenberg, Alterman examined the possibility that redemption cannot be born without the readiness of the redeemed themselves to use aggression

and cause bloodshed. In “Stars Outside” there are dozens of examples of redeeming joy being created from pain, cruelty and aggression. Cruelty is a positive trait of the redeeming Woman⁶⁵ and a reviving power for the nation. The storm destroys but also gives life and beauty to old, dying souls.⁶⁶ This paradox is applied to all levels of life — the personal-psychological, the interpersonal, the erotic, the national and the cultural: turning darkness into light is conditioned not only on the readiness to suffer but also on the readiness to cause suffering, to be cruel.

Cruelty in Alterman’s poetry is a metaphysical element. This can be shown by a comparison between Bialik’s *Ayelet Ha-shakhar* (Morning Star/doe) in “The Scroll of Fire” and Alterman’s *Ayelet* in the last poem of “Plague Poems.” Alterman’s *Ayelet*, like Bialik’s, is tender and delicate. She is described as *alma* (a maiden/virgin), “a star-girl,” “a star fledgling,” *rekhufat rissim* (with floating eyelashes). Bialik’s Morning Star is the opposite of the wrathful, destructive God, and represents mercy and compassion. Alterman’s *alma*, however, “stands upright with *makhlafot* (plaits/changes) of blood,” and her laughter joins the father’s “from tooth to nails.” She is both sacred and covered with footprints in blood not necessarily her own. The strange combination of blood and a halo of light, attributed to the national new Jewish spirit, was repeated in his “City of the Dove” in a poem which describes the docking of an illegal refugee ship of Jewish Holocaust survivors: “Two smoky lamps on a hook/ and a shaft of light through the lattice/ are shining on the nation’s nails and teeth.”⁶⁷ For Alterman the teeth and nails, symbols of beastly aggression, are needed for the redemption of the Jewish people when it is fighting for its independent political existence.

In “Stars Outside” the poet already identifies with Cain, the killer of his brother. Cain has a significant place in Alterman’s world.⁶⁸ In “The Joy of the Poor” and “Plague Poems” Alterman not only justified hatred and revenge, he even attributed sacredness to them: “And when you will celebrate your revenge like Sabbath or *rosh khodesh* (the beginning of the month)/ let Him — even

65 Ibid., p. 8.

66 Ibid., p. 157.

67 Alterman, *The Dove City*, p. 15.

68 Shamir, *Poetics and Politics*, pp. 97-126.

with one eye — see the sacredness.”⁶⁹ He attributed beauty to destruction: “And Amon was laid bare to beauty and destruction.”⁷⁰ The destruction of the No-Amon, which to him served as a symbol of modern European civilization pre-World War II, is a vision which lightens the world with a light of justice, redemption and truth.⁷¹

Alterman differs from Bialik in this respect: even in moments of sweeping wrath, Bialik rejected the feelings of revenge and refused to see them as a stage on the way to redemption. In poems in which Bialik expressed such feelings, they act not on the wicked people but on nature (“The Dead of the Desert”) or on the cosmos (“On the Slaughter”), or even on the revenging self (“The Scroll of Fire”). Nowhere did he justify acts of hatred or revenge. He viewed these feelings as demonic, beastlike drives, a terrible result of suffering: “You should have so much persecuted us if you have turned us into beasts,” wrote Bialik.⁷² Alterman, in contrast, accepted these negative feelings and their results as life’s painful verdict or doom, which is difficult to understand but should not be opposed by those who wish to survive.

This does not mean that Alterman was indifferent to the suffering caused to the innocent Jews because of cruel historical laws. On the contrary, in “Plague Poems” he explicitly wrote: “For the weapon is right in his verdict, — / but always when it bleeding passes by, / it leaves us, like a taste of salt, / the innocents’ tear.”⁷³ In “City of the Dove” Alterman clearly saw “the tribe whose cradle was expulsions and persecutions / now changes its skin, ready to inherit and *ligzor* (to decree/to cut),”⁷⁴ the Jewish people whose history is full of persecutions and suffering now inherits others’ lands and decides about their future fates. Alterman’s answer to this moral question is an enigmatic paradoxical world view, in which the identity of cruelty and redemption is only one of the insoluble riddles, like the birth of joy from weeping, the birth of love from hatred and the birth of revival from destruction. This

69 Alterman, *Poems From Long Ago*, p. 200.

70 Ibid., p. 245.

71 Ibid., p. 229.

72 Bialik, *Poems 1899-1934*, p. 46.

73 Alterman, *Poems of Long Ago*, p. 231.

74 Alterman, *The Dove City*, p. p. 83.

is the redeeming smile which is born from “sin and judgment and sin,” otherwise known as the cycle of justice and evil in the world. Alterman ended “Plague Poems” with reflections on “the enigma of power which never ends/ which is the enigma of endless trust (...) in vain the fools break their heads on it.”⁷⁵ Alterman inherited from the Russian symbolists not only the idea that art can redeem the poet and the whole world, and not only the view of the poet as a knight who courts a divine redeeming being, but also the structuring of the world as an identity of contrasts, which enables him to get rid of the distinction between Good and Evil.

“Alterman combines moral law with the necessity of survival,” wrote Ruth Kartun-Bloom in her epilogue to Alterman’s later play *Pythagoras Case* (1965). The theme of this play is the conflict between moral and scientific laws. For the playwright, the superior moral law is survival, which justifies disrespect for the accepted moral laws. The familial-national covenant as a means of survival was an absolute value for Alterman, and as such it was a law which should not be violated even if it was strange or frightening. In “Plague Poems” the father tells the son: “Here too are iron laws, enacted not in vain.”⁷⁶ These words echo both the iron rod in Revelation and Karl Marx’ formulations in his *Kapital* about the determinism of economical and historical laws. In “City of the Dove” life begins with “the shriek of iron shutters elevated by a pole like iron eye-lashes.” This iron (instead of the trembling silvery eyelashes of Sophia) is Alterman’s answer to the moral problem of apocalyptic thinking.

Unlike Greenberg, Alterman was bothered by this moral problem, and was not indifferent to the suffering of the innocent. The birth of redeeming joy from the innocents’ tears seemed to him a paradoxical, enigmatic law, but he accepted it as history’s iron law or as a mythological decree, which raises ambivalent feelings. Like the Russian poets of the Revolutions, Alterman too saw bloodshed as a terrible historical necessity, a heavy price that should be paid. Alterman was conscious, then, of the moral problems which rise from his views, and maybe this consciousness is the moral aspect of his apocalyptic writings.

75 Alterman, *Poems of Long Ago*, p. 254.

76 *Ibid.*, p. 245.

Apocalyptic thinking did not disappear from Israeli poetry and culture during the two decades after the foundation of the Israeli state. At that time the expression *shoah u-tkuma* (Holocaust and Resurrection) often appeared in the titles of Israeli literary, scholarly, and educational works, and even more so in political discourse. This expression implies that the *Shoah* was an apocalyptic event, a cosmic, incomprehensible event which was a necessary stage on the way to national redemption — the foundation of the state of Israel. Such a post-apocalyptic view of the Jewish-Israeli historical present can be found in Alterman's "City of the Dove": "And time is like a furrow now/ where love and hate and war ploughed/ the soil. It burnt there until [the nation] comes./ It comes to reap,"⁷⁷ which means that all the suffering was not in vain, it was part of all the elements of life, and it even improved the soil from which the nation would now grow.

Greenberg in his book *The Streets of the River* (1951), described the *Shoah* as a Gog and Magog war: "And in the meantime Gog and Magog stood up from their lair/ and in iron transport, blowing fire, they raised:/ underneath them (...) the Jewish homes in Europe-Babylon were crushed."⁷⁸ He described the *Shoah* as a river of death from which the Jewish nation will emerge purified and shining: "But... under the high gates of rainbow, in the experiences before the miracle of the Red Sea, I see the nation rising from her wash, her ancient wisdom shining, with pure heart and eyes (...) widely Hallelujah."⁷⁹ Greenberg viewed the Jewish people after the *Shoah* as chosen "sons of light," worthy of redemption.⁸⁰

The apocalyptic-mythological view of the *Shoah* as a cosmic catastrophe from which redemption was born has now almost completely disappeared from Israeli discourse and literature. Remnants can, however, be found in the poetry of Rivka Miriam, daughter of *Shoah* survivors. In one of her poems she described the *Shoah* as a chaotic primordial mythological world, where death and creation are taking place together.⁸¹ In her poem "Splitting" she described

77 Alterman, *The Dove City*, p. 7.

78 Greenberg, *Complete Works*, vol. 5, p. 71.

79 *Ibid.*, p. 151.

80 *Ibid.*, p. 84.

81 Rivka Miriam, *I Drowned in the Windows*, p. 72.

how the dead in the *Shoah* are celebrating, giving birth to themselves and to the poet together with them.⁸² In other poems she described herself as giving birth to the dead of the Shoah, as if she is the earth where they are buried and from which they are going to sprout.⁸³

Moshe Sartel (born in 1942 in Istanbul) has an interesting apocalyptic view of inner reality. Reality is described in his poems as a frightful and wild mythological vision, in a style which continues the apocalyptic tradition. The scene is populated by wild beasts and monsters. Cosmic frightful events change the world: “and the days became scarce and nights became scarce and the sun avoided shining on the world./ And from one shining [to another] three days, and from one shining seven days.”⁸⁴ The poet experiences the end of Days and his own death.⁸⁵ Human beings have wings and horns.⁸⁶ Redemption is a result of a mythological war which includes aggression and Satanic evil: “A man extends his finger into his own eye — and plucks it out. And a man extends/ his fist into his mouth — and swallows it in order to live and to sing and to live and to dance a thousand times./ and this is what I have seen one day, like a Satan, walking in the streets singing and happy/ who did not know that I get up from the table and dance before him alone/ and my sword is drawn in my hand.”⁸⁷ The sword alludes to the heavenly victory over Evil in Revelation. The emotional and stylistic manner of these poems is apocalyptic, but their meaning seems to be disconnected from the apocalyptic tradition, for the symbolic pictures and events do not represent historical situations; they express personal feelings and describe the human existential, not necessarily Jewish, situation.

To sum up: the apocalyptic view of Jewish and world history is an ancient Jewish-Christian tradition which became central in Christianity and flourished in Russia during the period of the Revolutions. This view has therapeutic

82 Ibid., p. 21.

83 Rivka Miriam, “Earth,” *My Yellow Gown*, p. 28; “Children,” “A Grave,” *I Drowned in the Windows*, pp. 40, 81.

84 Sartel, *For the Sun Will Not Darken*, p. 33.

85 Ibid., pp. 5-6

86 Sartel, *The Book of Great Victory*, p. 37.

87 Sartel, *For the Sun Will Not Darken*, p. 29.

power in times of collective suffering, but as a deterministic and simplistic view of reality it also encourages dangerous feelings, raises moral problems and enables political abuse. Modern Hebrew and Yiddish apocalyptic poetry was written under the influence of Symbolist and post-Symbolist Russian poetry. Bialik was the first to write modern Hebrew apocalyptic poetry. He adopted the symbols, style and rhetoric of the genre, but not its world view. In fact, Bialik used the apocalyptic style in order to reject the apocalyptic world view. Apocalyptic poetry was frequently seen in Yiddish literature during the 1920s, as a reaction to the traumatic Jewish experiences in Europe during the First World War, the Russian Revolutions and the Russian "Civil War." An apocalyptic understanding of Zionism and of the Holocaust can be found in the poetry of Shlonsky, Uri Zvi Greenberg and Alterman. After the foundation of the Israeli State, Alterman and Greenberg continued their apocalyptic reflections on the Jewish fate. Such understanding of Zionism and the Holocaust almost disappeared in Israeli poetry during the last 50 years, although here and there the apocalyptic style still emerges as an existential feeling.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Hassidism was not the last chapter in the history of Jewish mystical writing. Jewish mysticism was being created throughout the 20th century by Hebrew poets, many of whom were not observant. By writing these poems, they inherited and continued the tradition of Jewish mysticism. The mystical character of these texts is neither a result of biographical facts nor of inter-textual contacts with traditional Jewish mysticism. It is a result of its theme, contents, imagery, symbols, rhetoric and style. They were written by both observant and non-observant writers, and the border between the two is sometimes difficult to draw.

In order to include these texts within Jewish mysticism, one has to treat mysticism not as a strictly theological or theosophical theory, and not as an individual or social practice or movement, but as an emotional and spiritual experience which can be expressed by words. Mystical experiences are a universal phenomenon which can be found in many religions and cultures. It is perhaps a common human need, which might be satisfied or neglected by culture. Mystical literature was written in many languages, some of it by Jews. Franz Kafka and Paul C elan are recognized as mystical writers, although they were not observant. In the same sense, Hebrew mystical poetry was written in the 20th century by non-observant Jews who lived in Israel and elsewhere.

Oral and written descriptions of mystical experiences are formulated according to specific cultures and traditions, but in spite of these differences, mystical experiences include common basic elements which mystics and scholars often mention: it is mainly an ecstatic, happy feeling of spiritual elevation and disconnection with reality, a temporary, exciting, intimate unity with a sacred being, revealed by symbolic visions, voices and other concrete perceptions. The symbolic vision is non-realistic, and is often described by fire, light and water, erotic metaphors, circular forms, white, gold and red colors, being burned, drowned, swallowed or swept by water. This is a climax experience which cannot be completely communicated by words, but was vastly

communicated by written words in many languages, by writers who wished to share this experience with their readers. All texts which are intended to share personal mystical experiences with the reader are written in a literary style. In this sense, a large part of ancient and less ancient Jewish mysticism is worthy of a literary approach.

The cultural cover of mysticism is more open to intercultural contacts than established religions are. Jewish mysticism throughout its history absorbed various non-Jewish influences, including Gnostic, Moslem and Christian. Such influences, especially of modern European literature and culture, together with inter-textual contacts with Jewish mysticism, can be traced in 20th century Hebrew mystical poetry (including poetry which was written by observant writers) as well. Neo-Romanticism and Symbolism are the most important non-Jewish sources of this influence. Zionist culture, which was itself open to Hassidic ideas and traditions, was also an important cultural factor in the modern Hebrew poetic formulation of mystical experiences.

During the 19th century, Jewish mysticism was harshly criticized as “not really Jewish” by both Rabbinical Judaism and scholars of the Enlightenment movement. Hebrew *Hasskala* literature caricatured Hassidim as obscurant and primitive swindlers. The Bible, not mystical texts, was for mainstream the basis of Jewish identity and literary style.

Kabbalah and Hassidism, which today are considered legitimate and indivisible parts of the Jewish spiritual tradition, reached this status only at the beginning of the 20th century. Martin Buber and Gershom Scholem canonized Kabbalah and Hassidism in German intellectual circles. This positive turn to Jewish mysticism as a legitimate part of Judaism which should be evaluated, studied, and further developed, was begun toward the end of the 19th century by Jewish historians and literary writers in Czarist Russia. This in turn was influenced by Russian neo-mysticism, which at the beginning of the 20th century became a source of inspiration for German neo-Mysticism as well. Against the background of European Symbolist literature (which expressed neo-mystical trends), Jewish mystical texts were re-examined and became models for neo-Hassidic writing. Such Hebrew literary texts, which use Hassidic tales and preaching as bases for modernist mystical expression, were written in Russia beginning in the mid-1890s, by Peretz, Berdychevsky, Feierberg and Tseitlin.

Bialik was the first poet who used the Zohar and other Kabbalistic materials in order to express his own mystical feelings.

The main difference between traditional Jewish mysticism and modern Hebrew mystical poetry is the experience of sacredness not in terms of *dveikut* (unity) with God, but as a mysterious human spiritual sensation of disconnection from earthly existence and unity with an abstract sacred being. The poet is ready to devote himself unto death to this being, be it the spirit of the Jewish nation, poetic creativity, nature, childhood, life, joy, nature, moral purity or even the Zionist project. The different understandings of sacredness here enable tensions and conflicts between evenly-balanced values. The place of religious activities and situations such as praying, studying Torah and observing the religious laws is, while existent, smaller here than in traditional mysticism, while the place of spontaneous, playful activities, which are understood as purifying, freeing, or reviving, is larger.

Unlike traditional mysticism, 20th-century Hebrew poetry includes expressions of mystical yearnings in a world devoid of belief in God, and descriptions of unity with sacredness, whose existence is doubtful and frail. The personal, autobiographical character of the experience is clearer here than in traditional Jewish mysticism. The earthly anxieties which preceded the mystical experience and motivated it are described in more detail. The daring character of Jewish mystical thinking here reaches unprecedented extremity: the poet unites with a divine being, sometimes a feminine one, unto complete mutuality or even exchange of roles. The unity is more often described as a descent of sacredness than as a human ascension, or as a cancellation of horizontal distance.

The style of modern Hebrew mystical poetry bears the traces of contemporary modern poetry. Unlike traditional Jewish mystical texts, it contains realistic, even naturalistic details of landscape, urban surroundings, and specific physical perceptions which combine with traditional mystical symbols. The immanence of sacredness in the inferior reality is emphasized here even more than in traditional mysticism. Original metaphorical images and musical effects contribute to the effectiveness of text.

Mystical experience is considered by scholarship to differ from common religious experience by its individual character. Solitude is the expected

mystical situation. Unlike non-Jewish mysticism, Jewish mysticism evaluates and encourages collective mystical experiences. This is an interesting common denominator between traditional Jewish mysticism and some 20th century Hebrew poems, which continue this tradition in modern, sometimes Zionist, versions.

Yearnings for self-annihilation are an indivisible part of mystical experience in various religions and cultures. In Rabbinical Judaism and within Jewish mysticism there are many warnings against this dangerous tendency, but the idealization of self-annihilation and death is clear in the writings of the Tsfat Kabbalists and in Hassidism. Such idealization of death and yearning for a mystical experience which will disconnect the poet completely from life can be found in modern Hebrew poetry, especially in the writings of Pinhas Sadeh.

Mystical experience — whether Jewish or not — is often described by erotic metaphors and symbols. This is perhaps the reason for the presence of a feminine divine being, the *Shekhina*, in Jewish mysticism. Bialik, Shlonsky, Alterman, and other poets inherited the Jewish feminine image of God and developed it in their poetry, blurring the border between mystical and personal erotic experience. The anonymous Woman who appears in their poem was an insoluble problem for literary interpretation. It is here explained with the aid of Sophiological elements from the Russian poetry of Soloviev, Blok and Pasternak, which directly or indirectly influenced these Hebrew poets.

Mystical trends are often followed by apocalyptic understanding of history, according to which the End of Days is coming soon, suffering and bloodshed being an inevitable condition for redemption. Apocalyptic narrative and thinking has a problematic moral application: demonizing the Other, freeing people from responsibility and justifying human cruelty. Against the background of Jewish and Christian apocalyptic literature and Russian apocalyptic tradition, it is interesting to see the varying attitudes to apocalyptic thinking in the work of Yiddish poets, like Bialik, Shlonsky, Greenberg and Ben-Yitzhak, as well as the Israeli poets Rivka Miriam and Moshe Sartal.

What does the phenomenon of mysticism in modern Hebrew literature contribute to the understanding of Zionism?

This phenomenon is one of the manifestations of the spiritual aspect or level of the Zionist movement, which is no less important than its political

aspect. As such it is a potential bridge between observant Israeli, non-observant Israeli and non-Israeli Zionist Jews.

When people today say “Zionism” they mean a movement whose main goal is political: creating and maintaining a Jewish state which will protect the social rights and the personal and material security of Jews, a state which will ensure the political power of the Jewish people and prevent its physical extermination. According to this understanding, the most important system in Israel is the army. Other systems — economic, agricultural, communication, educational, cultural — are derived from the political existence of the state.

However, political Zionism, which was founded in the late 1890s, had a historical basis which soon became a competing ideological alternative, namely, “Spiritual Zionism.” Spiritual Zionism, the most famous representatives of which were Ahad Ha-Am, Bialik and Buber, did not foresee the danger of Jewish physical extermination; it was anxious about the death of the Jewish soul and spirit, the ground for its language, literature, music, folklore, religion, beliefs, and national character. It was even more anxious about the future of the creative life of the national spirit in countries where Jews could receive social and political rights. The leaders of spiritual Zionism could see the effects of enlightenment on Jewish life in Germany, where one generation of equal rights brought a sweeping wave of assimilation. They saw the contemporary waves of conversion to Christianity in England, France and Russia; they saw the efforts of Jewish secular thinkers and modern Rabbis to bring Judaism nearer to local Christianity and to blur the border between modern Judaism and local Christianity. They were concerned with the disappearance of Judaism as a creative culture, of its becoming a museum of folklore and ancient writings, disconnected from everyday life. They were afraid that if Jews continued to live in countries which enabled them to acculturate, Judaism as a living, creative culture would disappear. There would be no one to speak, read, write, sing and draw it. They saw how Jews in Europe were swept up by the new material and social options which were opened before them and feared the results: the extermination of the Jewish spirit.

The return of Jews to Eretz-Israel seemed necessary to the leaders of Spiritual Zionism not only in order to grant Jews an army, a government, a police force, agriculture and a tax system of their own, but to be a territory

where a normal, “healthy” Jewish life could exist and develop freely. They believed that this would only be possible in a state in which Jews are the ruling majority.

Perhaps after the *Shoah* their worries may seem ridiculous, but the fear that Judaism would die a natural death in countries where Jews could join the local culture was not far-fetched. The Yiddish language is a clear example: people say that Hitler and Stalin destroyed Jewish life in Europe, including Yiddish, but in America no one destroyed the language. Despite the fact that Hitler and Stalin never got to America, today the majority of Jews in America, even those who have not assimilated, do not speak or understand Yiddish, do not read it and do not need a Yiddish-language theater. For most American Jews, Yiddish exists now as a dead language, studied in universities and various circles. Yiddish in America does not exist and develop as a living language, although no one is forbidden to speak or read it. The leaders of Spiritual Zionism were afraid that the fate of the whole Jewish culture in the West would be like the fate of Yiddish in America.

How would Jewish culture in the West look today without the existence of Israel? The question can be debated, but what is not a matter for debate is the fact that in Israel cultural production—both religious and secular — is active and flourishing, and most of it has a clear Jewish face, even clearer when abroad.

What does all of this have to do with mysticism in modern Hebrew literature? It is historically connected. Ahad Ha-am was a loyal student of “Western” Russian thinking, whose hopes were connected with rational, enlightened Europe, in the vein of English Positivism. This movement created the Jewish Enlightenment, which viewed mysticism in general and Hassidism in particular as a shameful phenomenon, peripheral to Judaism. However, toward the end of the 19th century, these views went bankrupt. In Czarist Russia, in an atmosphere of disappointment and despair, surrounded by aggressive anarchist and revolutionist movements, writers who opposed political activity and believed in spiritual redemption as a solution to the growing suffering created a wave of neo-mystical thinking and literature. At the same time, German intellectuals and writers also turned to mysticism — perhaps as a reaction to the rise of aggressive nationalism — as a source of solutions, a way to

redeem human and social suffering. Mysticism was considered in Europe to be an Eastern phenomenon, in contrast to the rational enlightened Western culture. Its roots were found in the Far Eastern religions, in Islam, in Jewish and Christian Kabbalah and in Russian neo-Mysticism.

While Russian and German writers and thinkers turned their interests to evaluating “Eastern” mysticism, Jewish writers and thinkers who wrote in Hebrew and lived in Czarist Russia or studied in Germany also began to be interested in Hassidic and Kabbalist texts and to find in them inspiration for spiritual revival. Among them were Micha Yosef Berdychesky and Hayim Nahman Bialik, whose literary works influenced the thinking of Zionist political leaders. Others, like Rabbi Kook, Avraham Ben-Yitzhak, Yosef Hayim Brenner, Martin Buber, Aharon David Gordon, Meir Yaari, were themselves active as Zionist leaders. The pioneers of the 2nd *aliya* in the 1910s were fascinated by Russian revolutionary neo-mystical moods. They were no different from the creators of traditional Jewish mysticism in the Middle-Ages, who were influenced by Gnosticism, Moslem Sufi mysticism and Christianity.

The interest in Hassidism, Kabbalah and even Sabbateanism as sources of modern Jewish spiritual renovation was wide spread in Jewish thought at the beginning of the 20th century and was common to Zionist and non-Zionist (Hillel Zeitlin, Berdychesky) writers. This trend became part of Zionist literature and thinking, and motivated Zionist life, as we can learn from diaries, letters and other writings of the 2nd *aliya*. Literature written at the beginning of the 20th century became the basis for modern Hebrew and Israeli literature. The influence of Russian revolutionary-mystical poetry continued to hover over the poetry which was written in Eretz-Israel in the first half of the 20th century, together with Hassidic influence, which for some poets, like Shlonsky, Greenberg, Zoussman, and Sh. Shalom, was part of their familial tradition.

This mystical trend was in opposition to a Marxist materialistic ideology, which viewed religion in general and mysticism in particular as an enemy of the working people, “opium for the masses.” It also opposed the ideology which hoped to heal the Jewish “sick” or “dying” body by means of physical work and contact with nature. These trends (or shall we say beliefs?) were active side-by-side in Zionist culture in Eretz-Israel. Sometimes they mingled, like in Aharon David Gordon’s “The Religion of Work,” in which agricultural work received

a mystical value in Hassidic terms. This was the split spiritual-religious face of Zionism at that time. Alterman's poetry reflects this split.

In the 1950s-1960s, when "practical Zionism" became dominant in Israel, an anti-mystical reaction characterized Israeli literature, written under modernist Anglo-American and French Existentialist influences. In this period there were still poets who wrote in the mystical vein, like Dalia Rabikovich, Amir Gilboa, and Pinhas Sadeh, but such poetry was then less influential than the ironic, disillusioned poetry of Nathan Zach, Amichai, Pagis and Avidan. The leading critics and writers were blind to mystical trends in modern Hebrew literature as a whole.

The return of mystical poetry to the center of attention gradually began in the late 1960s, with the poetry of Zelda, on the one hand, and Yair Hurvitz and Yona Wollach, on the other. It is easy to explain this by making reference to the Six Day War, but these poets did not begin writing after the war. Poetic trends are not born from wars, they are born by moods and beliefs, by education and by the literature which the writer has read. During the last 40 years, Israeli poetry became once again open to mysticism. Scholars are interested in this phenomenon, but they often judge it by biographical or by inter-textual criteria only.

WORKS CITED

