Editor's Introduction: History and Mysticism

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Jewish Quarterly Review, Volume 101, Number 4, Fall 2011, pp. 479-481 (Article)

Published by University of Pennsylvania Press
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/jqr.2011.0038*

The Jewish Quarterly Review, Vol. 101, No. 4 (Fall 2011) 479–481

FORUM

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Surveying the development of Jewish studies over the past century, one can hardly avoid being struck by the increasingly prominent role played by research into the various forms of Jewish mysticism. Of course, the towering figure in blazing new pathways in, and actively promoting, the study of Jewish mysticism was Gershom Scholem (1897–1982). Although Scholem overstated his nineteenth-century predecessors' neglect of the material, it remains the case that the predilection of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* for rabbinics and philosophy gave way to a new scholarly interest in Jewish mysticism in the twentieth century.

The impressive staying power of the field into the twenty-first century owes partly, but only partly, to Scholem's extraordinary talents. Research into Jewish mysticism continues to attract some of the most linguistically adept and theoretically sophisticated scholars working in Jewish studies. Both the challenge of cracking a complex code of language and meaning and the rich symbology of the mystical universe have served to lure generation after generation of students to the task. It should be added that one of Scholem's great accomplishments was to make that world of Kabbalah sufficiently comprehensible to capture the attention of scholars, authors, and artists (e.g., Jung, Borges, Eco, Kitaj) outside of Jewish studies.

The dominant (some would say domineering) nature of Scholem's presence in the field for a half century has generated a good number of methodological, ideological, and conceptual rebellions among subsequent generations of scholars. In light of the rich diversity that has resulted from this pushback against Scholem, it is curious to note that some of the key questions remain the same. To wit, the issue of how and in what ways to contextualize the appearance of Jewish mysticism from ancient to modern times still vexes those engaged in its study. Should mysticism be seen as an autonomous, internalist current within the long flow of Jewish history? Is it reducible to the discrete local contexts in which it appears?

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Or does it somehow defy the logic and tools of the historian, yielding more easily to a less contextually bound phenomenological analysis?

As a way of gauging the orientation of the field today, the editors of the *Jewish Quarterly Review* invited three scholars to participate in a forum on the interrelationship between history and mysticism in contemporary research. Their three offerings address different time periods and bodies of mystical literature. Moreover, they represent a range of methodological approaches and points of departure. All urge a redoubled focus on the complex temporal and spatial contexts in which the corpora they study were crafted. Although this appears to be a simple and even banal claim, the three participants present a complex web of arguments that challenge a pair of ahistorical tendencies that can be inhibiting to further research: first, the tendency to mystify mystical literature by depositing it within a hazy cloud of timeless Jewish literary development; and second, the tendency to regard mysticism in its modern guise as terminal, no longer susceptible to the ceaselessly dynamic forces of historical change.

In the forum's opening essay, Ra'anan Boustan seeks to find a new contextual and analytic space in which to understand the relationship between rabbinic and Hekhalot literature in Late Antiquity. This attempt requires navigating among a trio of scholarly currents, none of which is sufficient to grasp the complexity of the relationship. The first is what Boustan calls "perennialism," which treats Hekhalot as autonomous and prior to rabbinic Judaism. The second, associated with the work of Scholem himself, conceived of Hekhalot literature as the inseparable, dialectical, esoteric "beating heart of rabbinic literature." The third and most recent tendency insists on a more contextually grounded approach to the relationship between Hekhalot and rabbinic literature, but ends up "pigeon-holing them into two discrete socio-cultural trajectories." Boustan, for his part, advocates a bidirectional, tension-filled relationship that moves across several contemporaneous Jewish subcultures. This kind of synchronic approach is, by his own admission, "messy," but nonetheless avoids some of the most disabling features of previous tacks.

Hartley Lachter shifts our attention to the somewhat more familiar terrain of medieval Kabbalah. Lachter proposes three central claims in his essay. First, an analysis that is based on "affinities" between mystical materials scattered over time and place is not adequate to the task of explaining the origins and development of Kabbalah. Rather, one must eschew the temptation of the ahistorical sweep and attend to the formative setting of thirteenth-century Castile in order to gain real explanatory traction. Second, the data which scholars of Kabbalah should study are "not personal experiences, states of mind, or God." Rather, the focus of

analysis, he argues in crafting his own epistemological-evidentiary credo, should be *discourse*, which "constructs meaning, serves strategic interests, and bolsters contested identities." The third key point in Lachter's neohistoricist project, and one closely related to the second, is that Jews are accorded, in medieval kabbalistic texts, considerable agency in maintaining the cosmic order. Highlighting this act of symbolic empowerment by the kabbalists exemplifies Lachter's methodological commitment to the study of discourse as a key to historical explication.

The final participant in the forum, Shaul Magid, moves the discussion to the relatively neglected domain of contemporary Kabbalah. He places at the center of his essay Scholem's pronouncement in 1963 that "there is no authentic original mysticism in our generation." Contra Scholem, whose presence as a prime polemical foil remains unabated, Magid notes that kabbalistic inquiry and production are in fact alive and well, especially in Israel. He regards the recent scholarly attention devoted to modern Kabbalah (e.g., books by Jonathan Garb and Pinchas Giller) as reflective of a new intellectual and cultural moment. The twin stimuli of postmodernism and post-Zionism have enabled old blinders to fall. As a result, it is now possible, Magid argues, to recognize the vibrancy of mysticism in *haredi* Jewish circles—and indeed to analyze it as part of a broader Israeli civil religion. At the same time, it is also possible to devote new attention to understudied Sephardic and Mizrahi religious cultures in contemporary Israel (and to their intersection with Ashkenazi religious cultures), thereby overcoming the neglect of previous scholars. As a general matter, Magid aims to dislodge the secularist bias of mainstream Kabbalah scholarship, as reflected in the complex legacy of the master himself, Gershom Scholem.

Taken as a whole, these three essays offer distinct and yet overlapping analyses of the state of the field. Covering different periods and materials, and speaking in diverse idioms, all three call for a turn back to history as the indispensable lens through which to study Jewish mysticism, a turn at once surprising and unsurprising, old-fashioned and newfangled, simple yet textured.

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