

MODERN MANIFESTATIONS OF JEWISH MYSTICISM – BACKGROUND AND SURVEY

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BACKGROUND

Mysticism is a phenomenological concept. As currently employed by scholars, the term does not refer to a particular intensity of religious feeling or piety, or to various manifestations of supernatural forces, but is, rather, a comprehensive descriptive category that encompasses a wide range of similar or related phenomena that are encountered in various forms in most religions. Although certain scholars extend the scope of the concept to phenomena outside the realm of religion, this article accepts the narrow usage.¹

Mysticism is thus a transcultural phenomenon. Its specific manifestations are determined by the cultures within which it falls, which are, as we have noted, religious: Jewish, Christian, Zen, Hindu, Moslem, etc. Furthermore, each species is often subdivided into subspecies. The specific component of each mysticism is thus the strongest influence on the manner in which the phenomenon is manifest. To use an image derived from the Kabbalah, the specific religions are the garments with which the mystical experience is garbed, the vessels within which the mystical light is contained. The relationship between religion and mysticism is thus intimate, and, indeed, it has been claimed that the former cannot exist without the latter. Nevertheless, the relationship is not always a comfortable one, as is evident from the perennial conflicts between the mystics and the theologians, the prophets and the priests.

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1. See, for example, Ben-Ami Scharfstein, *Mystical Experience* (Oxford, 1973), and the numerous exponents of the "perennial philosophy."

Though the theologian may often regret the very existence of the mystic, seeing him as a dangerous anarchist who rejects all authority except his personal interpretation of God's will, and the mystic may regard the theologian as a formalist who is far removed from the truth he so zealously seeks to defend, the two need each other. In order to elucidate this point, which is of great relevance to the subject of this article, it will be of value to examine the purely utilitarian aspects of this relationship between the mystic and the theologian, in terms of services rendered and benefits received.

The services received by the mystic include:

- 1) A world-view that provides external support and public validation for certain extremely powerful yet ultimately self-authenticating private experiences that are frequently paradoxical in nature and contradict non-mystical experience.
- 2) Access, or in certain cases, restriction of access, to the writings, thought and wisdom of great mystics of the past, to the extent that these are transmitted within esoteric religious traditions; this body of mystical wisdom provides guidance, and the specific language by means of which valued experiences can be understood, remembered, communicated, and, hopefully, repeated and enhanced.
- 3) A social network that facilitates contact with teachers and companions.

The benefits received by the established religions from this relationship include:

- 1) The creative input provided by the great mystics, which frequently serves as a renovating force.
- 2) Direct control over the mystics, especially through the firm insistence that they submit to the authority of religious dogma.
- 3) The existence of an organizational and ideational substructure that is capable of absorbing and redirecting the sudden, potentially destructive waves of popular mystical enthusiasm which appear from time to time in most human populations.

The relationship we have described existed in almost all traditional societies, and, it can be said that it was, on the whole, effective. It is the contention of this article that the anomalous situation of mysticism in the western world, and in western Judaism in particular, can only be understood in the light of the disintegration of this relationship, largely as a result of the weakness of orthodoxy, and its inability or unwillingness to provide the above services or to exercise controls.

Before we embark on our examination of the subspecies known as "contemporary manifestations of Jewish mysticism," it is necessary to look both at the phenomenon, mysticism, and the parent species, classical Jewish mysticism.

The study of the phenomenology of religion has made great advances since the pioneer work of William James and Rudolph Otto, and in recent years a number of

remarkable works on mysticism have been published.² A survey of this technical literature immediately reveals that despite the profound insight and extensive knowledge of the various scholars, there is no generally accepted definition of what is meant by the term. In the case under study, however, in which the focus of discussion is restricted to the relationship between species and its subspecies, it is methodologically permissible to apply a limited characterization, one that relates only to western monotheistic mysticism. It should be noted however that even this characterization is a heuristic listing of features, and is neither comprehensive nor exclusive.

1) Mysticism is rooted in a unique mode of perceiving and/or experiencing self, world and divinity, generally characterized by an ephemeral and sometimes ecstatic awareness of all-prevading unity. However, this root-mode of perceiving or experiencing is extremely common, and is to be regarded as no more than a necessary prerequisite for a mystical personality.

2) For an individual to be considered a mystic, and not merely a person who has undergone certain experiences or been afforded certain visions, it is generally necessary that:

- a) the mode of perception and/or experience become an overriding life concern;
- b) that this concern be translated into a special form of private language and behaviour;
- c) moreover, it is generally true that a) and b) can only be achieved by access to teachers, either directly, in a personal relationship, or indirectly.

3) Although mysticism is ultimately a solitary activity, it is generally pursued within some kind of community. In Western mysticisms, membership of such communities is often restricted.

4) Most mystical communities employ one or more techniques of meditation, the common characteristic of which is the attempt to remove the focus of consciousness from everyday life. These techniques are frequently difficult and may take years to master.

5) Although the mystical experience is an essential feature of mysticism, it is – in most cases – a rare occurrence, and much of the mystical way of life is devoted to the acquisition of mystical wisdom. On the functional level, this wisdom can be seen as a cognitive framework within and by means of which the experience can be understood, remembered, communicated, repeated and enhanced. This framework is generally couched in the language of esoteric traditions within the various religions.

Jewish mysticism is almost as old as Judaism itself. Records of experiences that can readily be recognized as mystical are abundant in the Bible. Nevertheless, a mystical

2. A complete listing is not possible. See, in particular, the works of Ninian Smart, Fritz Staal, R.C. Zaehner, Agenananda Bharati, and P.J. Moore's article "Modern studies in mysticism," in *Journal of Religion and Religions*, vol. 3 (1973).

tradition in the narrower sense is documented only from the Second Temple period, and Jewish mysticism, in the form that is known and extant today, emerged only in the 12th and 13th centuries in Spain and Provence, in the Kabbalah. It is important to note that the terms Jewish mysticism and Kabbalah are not synonymous. Although the theoretical kabbalistic writings provided the conceptual framework within which most Jewish mystical wisdom was cast, the subject matter – theosophy, cosmogony and cosmology – and the literary form they employed – for the most part either direct or indirect commentaries on the Bible – permitted the Kabbalah to exist and to flourish independently as a legitimate field of non-mystical study. Furthermore, just as study as a whole was democratic in much of medieval Jewry (at least for men), and was not restricted to priestly or rabbinic elites, so too access to kabbalistic knowledge was relatively easy. This fact was of immense historical significance as it generally permitted the Jewish communities to integrate and channelize the great upsurges of mystical enthusiasm that swept through medieval Europe. With one or two dramatic exceptions,³ Judaism was immunized against the uglier manifestations of popular mystical heresy that on occasion so disfigured medieval Christianity. It will be noted below that at the present time certain segments of western Jewry are being strongly influenced by such a wave – known as “New Age spirituality” – but lack the substrate of basic Jewish knowledge.

The various stages of development of Jewish mysticism have been studied and documented in great detail, at least as regards their ideational content.⁴ Unfortunately, little work has been done on the phenomenology of Jewish mysticism. This lack is regrettable, and not only for reasons of completeness of scholarship, but because it has engendered a situation (especially in Israel) in which the only criteria by which the authenticity of new forms of Jewish mysticism are assessed are academic scholarship on the one hand and orthodox dogma on the other. A striking example of this is the case of Martin Buber. The question of whether or not Buber was a creative innovator within the field of Jewish mysticism (or whether he was a mystic at all) is still open; however, it is clear that neither the dismissal of his contribution by the scholars on the grounds that he misinterprets the sources, nor the outright rejection of his position by orthodoxy on theological grounds (his negative attitude to the formal aspects of religion) does him justice. If Buber’s contribution is going to be assessed (and this is not the place for such an endeavour), it will be necessary to examine its position on the phenomenological dimension of Jewish mysticism. And what is true of Buber, who was without doubt a man of profound scholarship and erudition, is even more pertinent in the case of modern Jews who seek to re-discover Jewish mysticism.

It is therefore necessary to establish our own tools in this preliminary assessment of recent developments in mysticism in the Jewish world, one theological, the other

3. See Gershom Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi, the mystical messiah* (Princeton, 1971).

4. Much of this work has been done by the great Hebrew University scholar, Gershom Scholem. See in particular his *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York, several editions).

phenomenological. This task will oblige us to provide minimalistic working descriptions, which, as in the case of the characterization of mysticism given above, will be heuristic and not definitive.

The first characterization, of the theological dimension, we shall reduce to the limited area of a consensus of beliefs held by the majority of professing Jews over the last two thousand years. This is an arbitrary yardstick, and one that will certainly be rejected by orthodoxy, but it is convenient and meaningful for our purposes. The characterization of the second dimension will take the form of a listing of some of the salient phenomenological features of Jewish mysticism in the last few hundred years. This listing is preliminary, and represents a summary of notes prepared by the present author for a larger work in progress.

A. *The theological dimension*

Judaism is the religion of the *Jewish theological community*, a group of people who:

- 1) consider themselves to be religious Jews and not believers in any other faith;
- 2) espouse ethical monotheism, that is believe in the existence of a single deity who is the sole creator of the universe, is actively involved in its government, and who is the ultimate source of all morality and values;
- 3) accept the Bible (Torah) as the revelation of God's will to the Jewish people;
- 4) regard the interpretations of the Bible offered by sages throughout the ages as legitimate (this wording excludes, for example, the Karaite community, who reject both Mishnah and Talmud, but includes latter-day Reform Jews who perceive these interpretations as reflecting the exigencies of the times).

B. *The phenomenological dimension*

- 1) Jewish mysticism is characterized by a sense of deep paradox that derives from the awareness of an infinite gulf between the transcendent and the immanent. On the one hand, God, the creator, the prime mover, the source, the absolute law-giver, is utterly remote and incomprehensible; on the other hand, God's presence in the world is manifest in the particular and the immediate, accessible to sense data and common sense. Much of the thrust of tradition Jewish mysticism was directed at attempting to resolve this dissonance. Traditionally the main focus of the effort was in the performance of the *mitzvot*, the commandments, the interface between the absolute, unchanging and eternal and the mundane world. By complying with God's will as laid down in the Torah, the Jewish mystic sought to unify the two aspects of divinity. Indeed, the commonest form of Jewish meditation, that done on performing a *mitzvah*, is called *yihud*, "joining," or "uniting."
- 2) Within the mundane world, and in historical time, such unification – if it does take place – is ephemeral. The permanent resolution of cosmic dissonance will take place at some unspecified future time.
- 3) The human soul contains a spark of the divine essence, but though it seeks and

desires to return to its source, total unification is impossible. In this respect, Jewish mysticism differs from most other systems.

4) As the initial divine revelation at Mt. Sinai was verbal – the codification of a set of norms of human behaviour – so too much of the content of Jewish mysticism is verbal. Even in those meditation techniques that employ non-verbal exercises like contemplating on lights or sounds, there is a strong ideational basis in concepts. Nature mysticism and aesthetic mysticism are almost absent in the Jewish tradition, even in those trends in which there is a strong pantheistic influence.

5) Evil is a palpable power in the world, an immanent presence that threatens both man and God, though its ontological status is often unclarified.

In the past 150 years the Jewish theological community has undergone considerable changes, some of which reflect the events of Jewish history, and others are functions of the secularization that characterizes the entire western world. Two particular processes are of interest in the context of this article: 1) The Jewish theological community is shrinking relative to the Jewish demographic community; 2) Within the theological community, the segment of the population that can be characterized as seeking fulfilment of mystical predisposition in mysticism is shrinking. As a result of these trends, it was possible, until recent years, to portray extremely simplistically, the “mystical structure” of the Jewish people by means of three concentric circles: the outer one being the demographic community, the middle the theological community, the inner the mystical community.

However, even in the 1950's and 1960's, long before the current re-emergence of interest in mysticism in the west, this simplistic diagram was characterized by an anomalous feature, the presence in the outer area of Jews involved in non-Jewish mysticism, especially of eastern provenance. By adopting the life style and belief of other religions these Jews excluded themselves from the Jewish theological community, though they could (for one generation at least) still be regarded as demographic Jews involved in mysticism. This trend is still growing in momentum, as is evident from numerous accounts in the popular press, and, somewhat surprisingly, it has reached Israel. Hari Krishna devotees now decorate the streets of Jerusalem, Gurjjeff is being rediscovered, and Israel can claim to have a higher percentage of followers of Transcendental Meditation than any other country in the world. The situation in the U.S. can be epitomized by a conversation reported between a rabbi and a swami. Swami: “The Jews are the most spiritual people in the world.” Rabbi: “Yes, but how do you know?” Swami: “in every group of Yogis, Sufis, spiritual seekers, you find more Jews than others.”

Like the “brain-drain” that draws Ph.D.s from poor countries to richer ones, so this “soul-drain” is a cause of great concern to the “exporters”, who are however largely powerless. The reasons underlying this trend are many and complex, but it is possible to isolate two of them: 1) The inaccessibility of Jewish spiritual resources, due to the fact that many of those entrusted with Jewish education, even if they are in sympathy with mysticism, are not aware of their existence, and, in the Dias-

pora, the language barrier. 2) A negative attitude towards Judaism and Jewishness on the part of many young Jews. The second of these forces seems to have been somewhat weakened in the last 15 years in both Israel and the Diaspora, but for very different reasons.

In the U.S. the small but perceptible move towards Jewishness on the part of larger segments of the Jewish population appears to be associated with the new respectability of ethnicity, together with pride in the successes of political Zionism. In Israel, on the other hand, the return to Judaism appears to be motivated to a large extent by the subjective feeling that political Zionism has failed; at any rate, the vacuum of values and the growing materialism of Israel society are creating an atmosphere in which spiritual search is more common than in previous years.⁵

THE CONTEMPORARY SCENE: CATALOGING AND ASSESSMENT

1. *Traditional Orthodoxy*

a) The closed in-groups

Within the traditional ultra-orthodox Jewish world there are a few centers actively involved in mysticism, but these are still for the most part inwardly oriented, disinterested in recruitment, and either overtly hostile or indifferent to the outer world. It is thus extremely difficult to assess any changes or developments that may be taking place within these groups.

These in-groups fall into two broad categories, one of which is found in both Israel and the Diaspora (Hasidim), and the other almost exclusively in Israel (the Sephardi Kabbalists). It would clearly be an impertinence to challenge the Jewish authenticity of these groups either theologically or phenomenologically, but it should be noted that they seem to be much less creative than they were in the past. Furthermore, the Sephardi Kabbalists are afflicted by the encroachments of superstition and magic from the community within which they live.

b) The "missionary" groups

Certain ultra-orthodox groups do turn to the community at large, and offer mysticism not only to the theological, but also to the demographic community of non-religious Jews. However, it is important to note that the mysticism presented to the outgroup is often remarkably different from that guarded and maintained by the inner circles. The most striking example of this phenomenon is the world-wide Lubavich movement. The inner teachings of this great hasidic sect are among the most profound, original and subtle to be found in the Jewish mystical tradition, whereas the fare offered to recruits is frequently fundamentalist, simplistic, and strongly anti-intellectual.

5. See Steven Shaw and George E. Johnson, "Jews on an eastern religious quest and the Jewish response," in *Analysis*, published by the Institute for Jewish Policy Planning and Research of the Synagogue Council of America, November, 1973.

Bratslav Hasidism and a number of other groups (including the Sephardi Kabbalists) are willing to receive outsiders and to offer them some of their wisdom. However, perhaps the most interesting (and, for the present writer, certainly the most problematic) of such groups is that centered on the Merkaz Ha-Rav in Jerusalem, headed by Rabbi Z.Y. Kook. In many ways strictly orthodox and traditional, the Merkaz Ha-Rav is promoting a highly innovative and radical form of Jewish mysticism, which attributes mystical significance to the resettlement of the Land of Israel, and, through the Gush Emunim movement with which it is associated, employs political tactics to advance its aims. Whereas this movement has been able to attract much religious enthusiasm, it has on occasion been strongly attacked for fostering false messianic expectations.

The Merkaz Ha-Rav differs from the other “missionary” groups in its greater willingness to teach women, and in the social respectability of its recruits. There is no room for long-haired seekers in Merkaz Ha-Rav. It resembles the others in the maintaining of an inner and an outer doctrine, and in the one-way teaching relationship, in which the instructor can offer wisdom, but the pupil has nothing to contribute.

2. *Neo-Orthodoxy*

Scattered throughout the Jewish world there are a few highly talented and profound Jewish mystics who are totally immersed in tradition and also open to and involved in the modern world. Several of these teachers are acquainted with non-Jewish mystical systems, and are willing to enter two-way learning situations with their pupils. Unfortunately, with one exception, none of them has been able to create a movement or to extend his influence beyond the circles of private pupils.

The exception here is Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach, who has succeeded in bringing many young Jews, many of them previously lost or forlorn seekers, into his own special brand of Hasidism. Carlebach, however, has paid a heavy price for his success, in the form of rejection by much of the orthodox community of which he is by nature a member.

An interesting group within the neo-orthodox teachers of Jewish mysticism is that of those individuals who are willing to give guidance in the techniques of Jewish meditation, even to seekers who have made no commitment to follow a Jewish way of life. The lack of knowledge concerning the existence of a Jewish tradition of meditation is one of the major factors that draws Jews to other religions. However, as is the case of other systems, the Jewish world is also plagued by self-appointed teachers of meditation, some of whom are charlatans, others dangerous and most ignorant.

3. *Non-Halakhic “Establishment” Jews*

The Conservative and Reform movements within Judaism were conceived in a spirit of rationalism and nurtured with a deep dislike of “obscurantism”, which was frequently regarded as synonymous with Kabbalah and Hasidism. It is therefore a

remarkable irony of history that within this camp in U.S. Jewry one encounters signs of a meaningful revival of Jewish mysticism. Furthermore, among these Jews there is a deep awareness of the problems in attempting to build an existential mysticism within the framework of a fundamentalist theosophy which they in part reject. It is possible to note three figures who, each in his completely different way, has been a formative influence in this revival: Martin Buber, A.J. Heschel, and Zalman Schachter. The latter in particular has been instrumental in directing the zeal of existentialist mystically orientated young Jews away from the academic or literary expression of mysticism into an active involvement in the search for new styles of religious life. Schachter can also be seen in many ways as the "spiritual father" of the Havura movement, an fascinating experiment in Jewish communal living which emerged in the 1960's.⁶ Many of the founders and early members of this movement are now numbered among the leaders of the non-halakhic "Establishment" Jewish spiritual revival.

4. *Syncretists and Pagans*

a) In the Diaspora

The routes open to many young Jews in the U.S. who seek to express their incipient religiosity as Jews are conditioned by a number of factors: the "New Age" awareness of spirituality, with its wealth of easily available, though frequently vulgarized esoteric wisdom; the sparsity of teachers within the Jewish tradition, the inaccessibility of resources, and the language barrier. Nevertheless, as we have noted, there appears to be some reversal of the trend towards the loss of such Jews to other religions. Theoretically, at least, such a situation could provide the basis for creative recruitment to the Jewish theological and mystical communities, in which an acceptable form of syncretism would emerge. In some cases this has indeed occurred, but not infrequently the results have been more of the nature of a new Jewish paganism.

Syncretism has never been foreign to Jewish mysticism, and on a number of occasions the absorption of non-Jewish elements into mainstream Jewish mysticism has been very fruitful. The most creative input in this respect has generally been from the Moslem tradition of Sufi mysticism. Such an influence is clear, for example, in the works of Bahya ibn Paquda (11th cent., Spain), Abraham, the son of Maimonides (12th cent., Egypt), and the Beth El group of Sephardi Kabbalists (18-19th cent., Jerusalem). Furthermore, there are not infrequently veiled references in the sources to personal contacts between Jewish and Sufi mystics.

However, for syncretism to be successful, a prior condition is that the absorbing body be self confident and deeply involved in its own resources. Such a condition does not pertain in the segment of the Jewish community under discussion. The following two examples, drawn from the author's personal observations of radical

6. Schachter's article "Toward an Order of B'nei Or" (*Judaism*, Spring, 1964) was particularly effective.

experimental groups in the U.S., will perhaps illuminate the differences between syncretism that is possibly acceptable, and syncretism that leads to paganism. Both groups live in loosely knit urban communes, and to many outsiders, they appear to be almost identical, both groups are composed of well-educated young Jews who have pursued their spiritual search in eastern religions before rediscovering Judaism.

The members of Group A prepare for the Sabbath with Yoga, meditation, marijuana when it is available, and purification by ablu­tion in the ocean; they celebrate the Sabbath eve over a macrobiotic meal and song accompanied by guitar music. Nevertheless, their worship is informed by an awareness of a deity who is both transcendent — demanding, commanding — and immanent, present in their joy; they recognize the Sabbath as the day in which unification is achieved within divinity, and that the extent to which this will be successful depends on their own actions; they make use of traditional Jewish symbols in a fashion that may be unconventional, but certainly reflects their inner meaning; and they know that when the Sabbath ends dissonance will reappear in the world.

Group B does many of the things found in Group A. However, its members seem to be practicing a superficially Judaized form of syncretized eastern religions. When they meditate they employ a Hebraized mantra (the second syllable of the Hebrew word *Shalom* is identical with the best known Hindu mantra), but their goal is to reach a pantheistic sense of the oneness of all existence, in which their own souls are part. When they employ Jewish symbols, it is to enrich the non-Jewish aspect of their experience. They do not seek to create unity in a dissonant world, but to turn on to unity. There is no room in their world for a transcendent deity who makes demands that run counter to the inclinations of their souls.

It is possible to see Group A as providing a focus that can attract many Jews who would otherwise be lost in the “soul-drain.” The second appears to be made up of Jews who are already lost, and who are beyond the boundaries of the Jewish theological community even on the phenomenological dimension.

b) In Israel

In many respects Israel can be regarded as a cultural colony of the U.S., in which the “New Age spirituality” is an important import commodity. However, two autochthonic features of Israel society can be seen as modifying and limiting its impact among young Israelis. The first is the absence of the language barrier between the seeker and the sources; an Israeli who has completed high school is able to read medieval Hebrew, and can in a few months master the Aramaic language in which the major work of Jewish mysticism, the Zohar, is written. The second factor is the apparent monolithic structure of Jewish theology. Whereas a young American Jew can see at least four different and recognized trends within Judaism, and has little difficulty in envisioning a fifth or a sixth, his Israeli counterpart, perhaps over simplicistically, perceives only one — halakhic orthodoxy which, furthermore, is characterized by very few external manifestations of religiosity. The routes available to a secular Israeli who wishes to rediscover his Jewishness are few. The best known

is through one of the so-called new yeshivot, which offer a solid diet of Talmud and Halakhah, but which are on the whole antagonistic to mysticism. There are, in addition, a few scattered groups, apparently growing slowly in numbers, that can be regarded as successfully syncretistic; their access to the sources is a factor which saves these groups from the worst abuses that characterize this trend in the U.S.

However, many Israelis, on experiencing a spiritual awakening, find no route within Judaism that can offer them fulfilment, and have to choose between one of two options: non-Jewish systems, or the abandonment of the quest.

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