

SCHOLEM, MYSTICISM AND LIVING JUDAISM

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Mysticism and Judaism According to Gershom G.Scholem, A Critical Analysis. (Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought. Supplement. II.) Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1983.

I

Gershom Scholem is justly regarded as the leading scholar in the field of Jewish mysticism in this century. He devoted a lifetime to salvaging old and long-forgotten esoteric texts from the dust of oblivion, subjecting them to the rigorous scrutiny of modern methods of scientific research. By applying the most exacting techniques of philology and textual analysis, as well as strict standards of historical research and the latest conclusions of the study of comparative religions, he did much of the spade work in mapping the chronology of Jewish mysticism, cataloging the multitude of manuscripts and printed sources, dividing these up into various periods and streams of thought, as well as decoding and explicating some of the more obscure symbols and concepts of this literature. Due to the thoroughness of his research, which evinced a basic respect for the value of the material being studied, Scholem created a virtual revolution in the appreciation of Jewish mysticism. Instead of being regarded at best as a

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peripheral curio and more often as a regrettable aberration from the generally rational thrust of Jewish thought, as a result of Scholem's studies mysticism's significance within Judaism came to be recognised by scholars and laymen alike. This eventually had repercussions, not only upon the nature and direction of research within the narrow confines of Jewish thought, but also upon the study of less directly related fields such as Hebrew literature, Jewish history, sociology and folklore and on the complexion of Jewish historiography as a whole.

But despite Scholem's recognized position as master in the field of Jewish scholarship, there have been a few iconoclastic attempts to challenge some of the basic tenets underlying his research program. The common theme of these attacks is that, when dealing with Scholem's work, one must be careful to distinguish between his masterly reconstruction of the facts, on the one hand, and the evaluation or interpretation which he then proceeds to render to them, on the other. While Scholem has certainly established some findings that are incontrovertibly true, based as they are on an impressive edifice of historical reconstruction, the interpretation lent to these often rests upon underlying assumptions which have a certain tendentious or ideological slant and therefore remain subjective and open to argument. The first critique of this sort was expressed in a series of sharply written essays by the late Baruch Kurzweil (then Professor of Hebrew Literature at Bar-Ilan University). These essays originally appeared in the week-end edition of the daily "Ha-arets" newspaper, and were later published in book form.¹ This was followed by a critical article by Zvi Werblowsky (Professor of Comparative Religions at Hebrew University),² in the wake of the publication of Scholem's major two-volume work, *Sabbetai Ševi* (which Werblowsky later translated into English).³ A third book-length critique was David Biale's *Gershom Scholem — Kabbalah and Counter-History*,⁴ which was based upon Biale's dissertation on Scholem's work, written with the cooperation of Scholem himself. The most recent effort of this sort is the present monograph by Eliezer Schweid (Professor of Jewish Philosophy at Hebrew University).⁵ Of all these critiques, Schweid's work has perhaps created the most serious stir in academic circles in Israel. If one were to hazard a guess why this is so, there could be two explanations for this phenomenon. The timing clearly has something to do with it: in his lifetime Scholem was a formidable personality, who

1. B. Kurzweil, *Be-ma'avak 'al 'erkey ha-Yahadut* (Tel Aviv, 1969).

2. "Reflections on Gershom Scholem's Sabbatai Zevi" (Hebrew), *Molad* 15 (1957), 539–547.

3. *Sabbatai Ševi, The Mystical Messiah, 1626–1676*, [Bollingen Series. 93. (Princeton, 1973)].

4. (Cambridge, Mass., 1979).

5. [Readers of this journal may find it interesting to compare Schweid's eulogy of Scholem, which appeared in the Hebrew press thirty days after his passing, and in English in *Immanuel* 14 (1982), 129–141 — Editor].

spoke and wrote with great authority and charisma. As Schweid's is the first critique to be published following his death, the atmosphere now lends itself more easily to free and open discussion of some of Scholem's pet assumptions. Secondly, unlike the previous critiques of Scholem's work, Schweid not only criticizes, but also presents in some detail his own alternative theses to those of Scholem which he wishes to refute.

The reactions to Schweid's work have come fast and furious, so far mostly in the form of oral discussions at symposia held under various academic auspices in Israel. The most articulate objections stem from Scholem's direct disciples, who rank amongst the foremost current academic teachers of Kabbalah. These disciples, even before addressing themselves to the detailed list of distortions which Schweid purports to discover arising out of Scholem's underlying historical assumptions, take issue with Schweid's major allegation that these assumptions stem from some sort of personal conceptual bias. Scholem, they argue, was a historian and not a philosopher, who reached his historical conclusions only after painstaking research relying on the most scientific tools at his disposal. He was always excruciatingly careful to create a clear line of demarcation between the objective conclusions of his research and any personal reactions he might have to these. This sort of care is evident, it is said, even in the titles which he gave to his written work. On those rare occasions where he allowed himself to reveal something of Scholem the person, or ideologue, as opposed to Scholem the scientist and scholar, he would label these revelations accordingly, as in his untypical article, "Reflections Regarding the Possibility of Jewish Mysticism in our Times".⁶ The fact that people indulge in all sorts of speculations regarding Scholem's ulterior motives in dealing with this subject matter, so it is argued, can only lead us to the sorry conclusion that, despite his impressive accomplishments, Scholem has nonetheless failed in his objective of proving the intellectual respectability of Jewish mysticism as a field worthy in its own right of serious research. Because people have not yet been convinced of this, they are led to venture all manner of suppositions as to what could possibly have moved an intellect of such great stature as that of Scholem's to be fascinated by so trivial or ridiculous a subject. After all, nobody asks what moves the student of organic chemistry to his choice of research!⁷

There is a rival camp of scholars, however, who have welcomed Schweid's monograph with a certain measure of relief. They contend that we have long

6. (Hebrew), in *Devarim be-Go* (Tel-Aviv, 1976), 71-83.

7. This is the defence of Scholem's work that was offered in a public lecture by Professor Joseph Dan of the Hebrew University in a symposium in Jerusalem following the publication of Schweid's monograph.

graduated beyond those naive days when people actually believed in the myth of the total objectivity of science, as if it were possible to conjure up the perfect replica of some absolute truth which transcends the personal biases and prejudices of the scientist in question and the limits of his perceptions. The truth is that this kind of scepticism regarding the foolproof nature of scientific research has already been argued persuasively by various philosophers even regarding the natural sciences (e.g. Thomas Kuhn).⁸ How much more so does this apply to so inexact a discipline as history, where the selection of material and the evaluation of its relative importance is so much more subject to the idiosyncrasies of individual judgment. Thus, members of the pro-Schweid camp include certain students of Jewish thought who have long nursed some measure of discomfort when confronted by Scholem's presentation of the nature of Judaism, without having the tools to challenge the master head-on. Their discomfort has been nurtured by the growing phenomenon of students far removed from direct contact with living Judaism who are motivated to study Scholem's work out of a curiosity to discover "What is Judaism," who come away with the impression that all sorts of wierd and esoteric practices were the bread-and-butter of the ordinary Jew throughout the generations. It is worthwhile speculating to what extent this lopsided emphasis as to what constitutes the life-blood of normative Judaism is a result of the fact that most of the scholars today engaged in the scientific study of Judaism (including Scholem) are not Talmudic scholars in the traditional sense of the term (*Talmidey Hakhamim*), unlike most of the authors of the works they are analysing. But in addition to the blatant discrepancy between the intellectual baggage brought by modern scholars to the study of Kabbalah and the spiritual tradition, mental outlook and habits of thinking of the Kabbalists themselves, the ideology of historicity to which the scholarly study of Judaism has been so firmly wedded more or less since its inception also facilitates the acceptance of one-sided and distorted characterisations of Judaism as final and authoritative.

By "historicity" I refer to the pretentious belief of some scholars and their readers that it is possible to reconstruct a totally objective replica of the past, completely devoid of the subjective leanings of the scholar in question. G. Scholem was the representative par excellence of just such a belief. Admittedly, he cannot be accused of the academic naivete which characterizes some of the staunchest supporters of this school of thought, or of blindness as to the impact of the scholar's personal inclinations on his work. The truth is that Scholem struggled hard to perfect the methods of historic research. At an international conference of philosophers at the Van Leer Institute in Jerusalem some six years

8. See his book: *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago, 1962).

ago, Scholem asked from the floor whether the participants could not give some direction regarding the whole problem of objective historiography. It seemed clear that the criticisms of Kurzweil *et al* had struck home, and that Scholem was puzzled.⁹ Scholem himself recognized full well that the scientific process must necessarily begin with an organizing hypothesis born of the subjective intuitions of the scholar, which is only subsequently tested by the facts which supply the critical feedback to the original thesis. There then commences a painstaking process of refinement produced by the dynamic interaction between the historian's hypothesis and the message of his sources. Under the impact of these sources, the historian may be forced to go back, modify his original thesis, return to the facts again, recheck the modified thesis against the data, etc., until by a continuous process of rechecking and modification he eventually reaches something approximating that which we choose to call "historic accuracy". But one must here add a point that Scholem and his historicist friends generally fail to take into account: i.e., that the very process of refinement which emerges from the dialectic relationship between intuition and empirical evidence is governed by a factor which is itself subjective in some measure — namely, the faculty of judgment. What is considered "reasonable" and self-evident is a matter largely determined by the conventions and the spiritual climate in which the scientist moves. There are certain explanations or interpretations which will appear perfectly acceptable or obvious in one setting, audience and circumstances, which will appear totally ludicrous and unworthy of consideration in another. For this reason, despite the fact that Scholem always aimed for maximum accuracy and could certainly not be accused of intellectual dishonesty (to the contrary, he generally welcomed the critical corrections of his disciples, so long as they remained within the framework of his basic historiographic assumptions,¹⁰ and exhibited the highest order of scholarly integrity in his willingness to backtrack from his most cherished hunches — such as when he retracted his original contention regarding the antiquity of the Zohar in the light of exacting rechecking of the evidence), one nevertheless cannot accept his total faith in the possibility of objective science.

II

It is well known that Scholem's scholarly career began as a polemic against 19th century "Wissenschaft des Judentums," because he believed that this school of

9. The reaction of the philosophers was one of nervous laughter — an indication, perhaps, of their understanding that this sort of problem was old stuff, and that very little case could nowadays be made for so-called objective scientific history.

10. In conversation, he was known to reject the works of certain more "orthodox" scholars of Jewish thought as being intended for a different community of readers which did not accept his basic historiographic assumptions and scientific methods.

research had failed in its task of scientific objectivity.¹¹ His criticism was originally directed against those scientific scholars of Judaism in Germany who were clearly prompted by the motivation, arising out of their historic situation, to present Judaism merely as the intellectual history of a unique theology characterized by its rational quality. According to Scholem, these scholars of Judaism were torn between realism and romanticism, and by the tension between the wish for objective science and the need to engage in apologetics. On the one hand, these Jews believed in the importance of objective tools of scientific research, but they were also moved by the wish to portray the “essence” of Judaism as an enlightened and cosmopolitan value, which would earn its practitioners emancipation and equality amongst the family of nations. Thus, they attempted, by means of scientific method, to prove that the essence of pure Judaism was a variety of rationalist philosophy — a universal value worthy of acceptance everywhere, and certainly suited to the Western culture of the times. With this end in mind, they tended to bury all mention of phenomena conflicting with this alleged primary quality of Judaism, labelling these as peripheral, reactionary, the result of the contaminating influence of foreign cultures, and inauthentic. Anything irrational, Messianic, nationalist and particularist was swept under the carpet as unworthy of exhibit in the “Museum of Judaism” which they had erected. Therefore, Scholem argued, *Wissenschaft des Judentums* was less an objective scientific school than an apologetic effort to prove how much Judaism had in common with the bourgeois values of the enlightened German culture of its time.¹² But, just as Scholem scorned the middle-class nature of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* and its apologetic conclusions, he was also outspokenly critical of the nationalist-Zionist reaction to this German school (despite the fact that he had absorbed some of its influence in accepting their revived interest in the suppressed mythic and “earthy” aspects of Jewish life, expressed by such people as Buber and M.J. Berdichevski). What Scholem objected to here was the chauvinist tendency of this romantic reaction to uncritically accept any and every Jewish phenomenon as an expression of its essence. He also took issue with the tendency of nationalist-Zionist scholars to minimize the importance of the intellectual history of Judaism, seeing the significance of the various spiritual movements in Jewish history mainly in their political and social forms and in the institutions of self-government which they created which, for example, underlay their interest in and sympathy with the Hassidic movement. Scholem therefore argued that any objective study of Judaism was impossible until the Zionist dream would be realized. Only when Jewish scholarship could rid itself of the need to look nervously over its shoulder

11. See Biale, 4–5.

12. *Devarim be-Go*, 385–398. See also “The Science of Judaism Then and Now” in Scholem’s collection, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, (New York, 1971), 308–309.

to see how it was reflected in the eyes of the non-Jew, or of the desire to reassure itself of its national, political character, would the taint of apologetics be totally eradicated and scholarship left free to pursue its aims unfettered by so many prejudices.

Scholem wished to believe that, despite certain new hazards, namely, the impact of the Holocaust and the establishment of the State of Israel, the Jewish historic setting in his day contained the potential to finally mature and enter this happy state of affairs. Despite the tentativeness with which he expressed this hope, Scholem believed that, once Jewish scholarship would manage to shed its current set of tendentious interests, it would be left with the option of disinterested scholarship totally devoid of tendentiousness in general.¹³ But herein, if the critics are correct, lay Scholem's fallacy, for what actually happens is that the original set of preconceptions or tendencies is exchanged for a new one. Never is there a historian who is altogether devoid of preconceptions. Scholem did not realize that the dynamics of Jewish history even in the post-Zionist era would inevitably engender subjective inclinations of its own, and continue to render the goal of objective history an elusive dream.

Consistent with his dream of objectivity, Scholem chose to describe himself as a "religious anarchist". As Biale points out, "although the precise meaning of the term must emerge from the various contexts of Scholem's work, we may begin with a preliminary definition of anarchism as a philosophy that recognizes no single source of authority".¹⁴ Contrary to the picture painted by the "Wissenschaft des Judentums" scholars, there is no predefined essence of Judaism. Judaism is anarchistic and therein lies its vitality, for in Scholem's eyes all dogma is a sign of lack of vibrance. But, Biale continues, one must nevertheless distinguish not only between religious anarchism and nihilism, which rejects all sources of authority, but also between anarchism and liberal pluralism, which claims that all sources of authority are equally valid. Thus Scholem, while recognizing the legitimacy of various traditions in Judaism, nevertheless points to one tradition, namely, that of the mystical element as the "heart" of Judaism. True, Judaism cannot be encapsulated in dogmas, but nonetheless, its external forms appear in the guise of the Halakhah, and its innermost essence is crystallized in mysticism of a particular sort — a mysticism that sets out to explore the dynamic hidden within the life of the transcendent God, and to revise a narrow understanding of monotheism by incorporating within it elements of pantheism and myth. The true history of the Jewish people is contained in this

13. *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, 309–312; *Devarim be-Go*, 399–403.

14. Biale, 2.

mystical urge, according to Scholem. Its inner life is not to be sought in the external religious institutions of Judaism, but rather in this ancient, subterranean tradition which carried the life blood of Judaism throughout the generations. Despite its esoteric nature, it provided a fertile source of inspiration for popular religion — particularly following the expulsion from Spain. Being the vital element of Jewish thought, its literature is not primarily the result of foreign influences, but rather the reflection of authentic internal development. This assumption led Scholem to hypothesize the early authorship of the Zohar, but once this theory was confounded, he proceeded to seek the roots of Jewish mysticism in some other early source. By the same token, it is only in mysticism that one should concentrate hopes for religious revival in the future.

III

Schweid, however, in the wake of critics before him, accuses Scholem's conclusions of being no more free of tendentiousness than those of his predecessors. His conclusions do not necessarily arise out of the facts but, on the contrary, the facts are often formulated in their light. According to Schweid, Scholem's evaluation of what he defines as Jewish mysticism as the heart of Judaism derives from his wish to find in this mysticism a respectable lineage to which he can peg the revolt of modern Judaism against the Judaism of Exile, and especially against the stifling rigor of the halakhic establishment (with the liberal rationalism of *Wissenschafts des Judentum* thrown in), and to see in the Haskalah (Enlightenment) movement and in secular Zionism the legitimate heirs of authentic Judaism. Scholem acknowledged the value of Halakhah in its ability to set limits to the irrational element in religion, but not as a power which could provide positive nourishment for its religious life and supply it with content. It is blatantly apparent, says Schweid, that Scholem's fascination with the irrational and rebellious elements in the history of Jewish thought involved a certain measure of delight which he took in blasting the censorship applied by the Halakhic establishment vis a vis all discomfiting phenomena which were not to its liking. There is certainly interest in reconstructing a more faithful image of the wealth of tensions and conflicting tendencies which furnished Jewish religious life in fact, but his interest is not merely academic. Basing himself on latent anti-nomistic tendencies which he detects in mysticism, Scholem wished to draw a direct line of descent from the Messianic Kabbalah in its Lurianic version in Safed to the Sabbatean movement, which drew the inevitable anti-nomistic conclusion from the Messianic dream, through the Enlightenment and Reform movement, to the secular Zionism of modern day Israel. The leaders of the Enlightenment and of the secular Zionist movement of today are no less genuinely "Jewish", and perhaps even more so, than the halakhists, because they have merely developed the basic ideas inherent in Kabbalah to their logical conclusions. Their secularism is only apparent, and it is highly unlikely that it will

not eventually bear spiritual fruit related to its past — perhaps not in the image of the *Shulhan Arukh*, but no less formative in its measure of influence.¹⁵

In order to establish these assumptions, claims Schweid, Scholem was forced to develop an intellectual basis for his hypotheses, which involves too specific a definition of mysticism in general and its place in the history of religion in particular.¹⁶ One might add that the same motive also forced Scholem into an overloose definition of mysticism in the Jewish tradition. As a result, the complicated theosophic speculations regarding the nature of the Godhead of mainstream Sephirotic Kabbalah, which often bordered on pilpulistic scholasticism, and the writings of “prophetic” mystics, inspired by more immediate experience of realms beyond the normal range of human consciousness, were regarded by Scholem as equally germane to his field of enquiry. Schweid’s allegation that Scholem was forced to develop a definition of mysticism custom-tailored to the exigencies of his historical ideology might, indeed, supply an explanation for the curious lack of pre-occupation among his disciples with questions regarding the significance and import of the mystical phenomenon in general. In Scholem’s defense, it could be argued that, in his specialized definition of mysticism, he was merely reacting to the unique nature of his material, which does not correspond exactly to any of the normal usages of these term. But Scholem did correctly perceive that the phenomena he was dealing with did at least bear a family resemblance to what is generally called mysticism. The complaint, then, is that he could perhaps have understood the specific Jewish phenomenon more deeply by seeing it in its broader perspective.

It seems to me that, just as the study of Jewish thought at large has until recently suffered from being treated as a subject totally divorced from the general

15. Schweid, 11–12; 14–15; 37–38. Schweid bases the reconstruction of Scholem’s motives upon a combination of hints and allusions scattered throughout his more personal writings. For references, see Schweid, 11–12, notes 9 and 10; 37–38, note 46. Such prognostications are surely interesting and indicative of the assumptions and hopes that motivated Scholem the man. Schweid’s allegation that Scholem’s exaggerated view of the importance of mysticism and its antinomistic potentialities to Jewish thought is based on motives which stem from the wish to legitimize secular Zionism is even more central to the critique of Kurzweil and Werblowsky. However, as Biale points out (171–191), Scholem’s attitude is much more complicated than they would indicate. Adopting Sabbateanism per se as a simple model for Zionism is a danger Scholem wishes Jewish history to avoid. Zionism must base itself on a dialectic between the liberating spirit released by the nihilistic forces of this 17th century watershed in Jewish history and the more constructive tradition of living responsibly inside of history. This involves a “neutralization” of the demonic aspect of apocalyptic Messianism and a redirecting of utopian dreams to concrete Jewish national concerns. This “neutralization” syndrome, which Scholem applies to Jewish history, exactly parallels his view of halakhah as regulating the free spirit and spontaneity of the mystical urge.

16. Schweid, 5–7.

problematics of philosophy, with its ideas presented from a purely historical viewpoint unrelated to perennial (and thus contemporary) issues, so has the study of Jewish mysticism à la Scholem been hampered by a parallel lack, in being somewhat detached from the study of the mystical experience in general and of the problematics arising from this. For his students, industriously writing notes at his well-attended lectures, there often seemed to lurk in between the lines of their notes such questions as: What is one to make of the mystical experience? Is it merely a psychological phenomenon with no ontological foundation in the world of reality? Or should one perhaps relate to it as the Kabbalists themselves did, in a neo-Platonic manner, seeing such experiences as a break-through into a world of ideas possessed of a metaphysic existence of its own? Then again, perhaps one ought to view the mystical experience through neo-Kantian eyes — as the interpretation, born of a certain tradition, of a noumenal reality beyond human description?¹⁷ Another problem is the question of the exact borderline between mysticism and magic — a topic to which Scholem often made tantalizing passing references, but never fully explored. An immense literature, with which Scholem was obviously well-acquainted, has sprung up dealing with these questions in the study of mysticism in general, but no one dared raise them in his lectures, for Scholem himself almost never dealt with them, and his research programs seemed to regard them as irrelevant. No wonder then that very few of Scholem's immediate heirs are at home in the mystical literature of other religions, let alone familiar with the various disciplines used in the study of religion at large. Those who continue the field of research after Scholem — and these include the cream of Israeli scholars — tend to see scholarship merely as the analysis of texts, rather than as the solving of problems or the answering of questions. As one American critic put it, one's "intellectual spurs" are acquired in Jerusalem by the rigorous study of one set of sources which leads to "covering" another one, and so on.¹⁸ It is true that an enormous amount of spade work has yet to be done in bringing to light all sorts of texts, and even in determining the full scope of the material involved. However, the total preoccupation of Scholem's disciples with the dry academic exercise of historic sleuthery, "conquering" periods, identifying influences, comparing texts and variant readings and summarizing contents, to the almost total exclusion of the main topic of their studies — the mystical experience itself — will become, if it is allowed to continue, a declaration of

17. As becomes clear from a reading of Biale's fascinating chapter, "Theology, Language and History" (pp. 79–112), Scholem's earlier writings concerning the philosophy of language offer some clues to his position on this issue as well. In these articles, he debates Buber regarding the nature and efficacy of language in transmitting the mystical experience. Scholem regarded all revelation as an essentially linguistic experience. In the wake of Walter Benjamin, he understood human language as the imposing of order, which lends meaning, to the "meta-meaningful," primordial language that is an essential part of the ultimate reality which is the source of all perception.

18. See Ivan G. Marcus, "Last Year in Jerusalem", *Response* 44 (1983), 23–34.

poverty. Perhaps it is the fault, in part measure at least, of the idiosyncratic definition which Scholem evolved for Jewish mysticism in order to fit it into his original historical and ideological assumptions.

As to the definition of mysticism, Scholem claimed that there is no such thing as mysticism in the abstract,¹⁹ and that the specific variants of the mystic phenomenon cannot be divorced from the characteristic features of the particular religion from which it springs. He seems to me to be at least partly right in this. Mysticism in the abstract, detached from any particular historical religion, is an impoverished thing with virtually no roots in history. However, Scholem goes on to claim that mysticism is a definite stage in the historical development of all religions, particularly of the great monotheistic systems, which bears a dialectic relationship to the stage preceding it. In this connection, Scholem distinguished between three different stages in the development of any religion:

The primitive, naive stage, “represents the world as being full of gods whom man encounters at every step and whose presence can be experienced without recourse to ecstatic meditation,” because “the abyss between man and God has not (yet) become a fact of the inner consciousness.” This is the “mythical epoch” or “childhood of mankind,” when the universe is conceived as totally monistic, as one substantive unity and “Nature is the scene of Man’s relation with God.”²⁰

In the second, reflective period, which also bears no connection as yet with mysticism, the initial “dream-harmony between Man, Universe and God” is destroyed, and man feels himself isolated from the other elements of his mythical and primitive consciousness. This is due to the “creation of a vast abyss, conceived as absolute, between God, the infinite and transcendental being, and Man, the finite creature.”²¹ This is the classical stage in the history of religion. Here, the scene of Man’s meeting God is no longer in Nature, but rather in the institutionalized prayer of the religious community and in the moral and religious action defined by his law-giving revelation.

The third stage may be called the romantic period of religious faith, in which Man searches for the hidden path to span the gap between himself and God, out of a wish to return to the primal unity of the early mythic stage. The scene of religious life now becomes the soul of man and the soul’s path through “the abysmal multiplicity of things” to the experience of the Divine reality, now conceived as

19. *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York, 1941), 6.

20. *op. cit.*, 7.

21. *op. cit.*, 7.

the “primordial unity of all things.”²² This is a form of return to the world of mythology following the experience of the abyss: a quest for the innocence destroyed by the development of a more sophisticated religious consciousness.

The romantic stage manages to remain within the confines of institutionalized religion if it does not destroy the values and practices created in the second stage, but rather invests its religious forms of expression with new meanings. But there exists, says Scholem, a latent tension between the two stages, which — given the necessary circumstances — may flare up into open rebellion. Thus, within Jewish mysticism are contained the seeds of anti-nomism which gradually gained momentum within the course of Jewish history, particularly from the 14th century on, reaching its peak in the Sabbatean anti-nomistic outburst, which was nothing more than the natural consequence of this basic incongruity between the mystical experience and the idea of God which stressed the aspects of Creator, King and Law-Giver.²³

According to Schweid, this theory of the three stages in the development of religion, along with the characterization of these stages, is problematic and does not correspond to the facts. Against these hypotheses of Scholem’s, Schweid proposes alternative definitions of the mystical phenomenon:

Mysticism is not a necessary phase in the development of religion. It is a necessary development only to the extent that the original myth established by the father religion was of a pagan nature. Furthermore, mysticism does not necessarily appear as a late development. Religious systems do exist in which mysticism is part of the original myth, while in religions whose original myth was non-pagan, mysticism may hardly play a role at all.

Precisely because the myth upon which Judaism is based is not pagan, mysticism appears in Judaism at a relatively late stage and bears a certain degree of tension with it. To the extent that the mystical tendency remains within the boundaries of Judaism, it is characterized — even according to Scholem — by ethical monotheism, the belief in the Torah as Divine Revelation and a recoil from the wish for pantheistic union with God. According to Schweid, the factor which distinguished Judaism from the surrounding religions from the age of the prophets and on was not mysticism. Mystical movements generally appeared in Judaism as a secondary prop, vital to certain segments of the nation at certain stages of its history in their attempts to ward off foreign influences. But whenever

22. *op. cit.*, 8.

23. *op. cit.*, 9–10.

these movements went beyond their auxiliary status and veered toward the heart of the religious experience, there occurred a catastrophic upheaval (as in the appearance of Christianity and Sabbateanism, which Judaism expelled from its ranks). Therefore, it is absurd to speak of Sabbateanism, for example, as a stimulating factor in the development of Jewish thought. Only to the extent that the personalities affected by this movement managed to overcome the Sabbatean basis of their thought and to latch on to non-mystical elements were they able to re-anchor themselves in Judaism and offer it some avenue of continuity.²⁴

IV

Against Scholem's theories regarding Kabbalah as the principal force within Judaism, Schweid suggests his own solution to the secret of Jewish continuity: the halakhic way of life based, not on a pagan myth directed towards Nature, but on a new genre which Schweid entitles "historic myth" — concerned with God's relationship to His people, to Creation, to the stories of the forefathers of the Jewish people, the Exodus from Egypt and the giving of the Torah — the myth of a God who reveals Himself, commands and provides for His creation in the development of history. Halakhah is not only an external shell, but involves a wealth of positive religious content, constantly evolving and recharging and carrying within it a vital and powerful religious experience of the living God, who relates as Father to His sons, as King to His subjects, who loves and commands as benign Ruler and Judge. The Jewish reaction to the crisis of the breakdown of naive religion is specifically non-mystical, but rather builds upon grappling with concrete reality and building a bridge to God within the framework of this world, without attempting to break through to what exists in the Beyond.²⁵

Here is an absorbing counter-thesis to Scholem's, demanding careful examination beyond the scope of this essay. Obviously, Schweid's view of the centrality of Halakhah and of the relatively peripheral relationship of mysticism to the Jewish experience is more congenial to the sensibilities of the ordinary practicing Jew. However, it may be that Schweid is not the ideal candidate for waging the battles of Orthodox Jewry; more detailed investigation may reveal that Schweid's conclusions are pegged to other assumptions about which the more sophisticated Jew of this type would have serious reservations: for example, his contention that Orthodoxy rests on a fundamentalist definition of revelation (an assumption with which Scholem, for once, concurs). Be that as it may, as a result of his alternative historical interpretation of the characteristic feature of Judaism, Schweid points to a long list of distortions which he sees in Scholem's understanding of various phenomena in the history of Jewish thought and the relative weight which he

24. Schweid, 37; 41–42; 71–72.

25. Schweid, 29; 34.

attributes to these. Again, it is beyond the scope of this discussion to provide an exhaustive reaction to these criticisms and decide which interpretation — that of Scholem or of Schweid — is more accurate historically. However, some of Schweid's observations may be briefly summarized as follows:

1. The Gnostic element in Judaism: Scholem has a special interest, arising from his basic hypothesis, in countering the general assumption of scholars, and establishing that Gnosticism is not a foreign element which seeped through at some point to Judaism, but that there exists an original Jewish variety of Gnosis (which one of his disciples has managed to locate as far back as the Biblical period).²⁶

2. The prophetic phenomenon: Schweid notes the curious fact that Scholem virtually ignores the period of the Prophets, and suggests that this is because, according to Scholem's scheme, this stage had to be understood as part of the naive first stage of religion prior to the formalization of the Halakhah. Therefore, the stage of prophecy cannot be interpreted either as mysticism or as any other form of reflective reaction to the breakdown of the naive religious consciousness. According to Scholem, the prophets are characterized by a de-mythologizing tendency as the antidote to paganism — a tendency which continued into medieval times and the thought of Maimonides. In contradiction to this tendency, there always appeared the stance of popular religion, which was not satisfied with the idea of an abstract God, devoid of content. This popular impulse served as the basis for mysticism.²⁷ Schweid contends, however, that all Biblical scholars — including those who saw in Judaism a new religion bearing no relationship to its pagan surroundings as well as those who saw it as a revolutionary development which sprung from paganism itself — see the nature of prophecy as reflective. Sometimes this reflective reaction in prophecy takes a mystical form, which is why several prophetic visions served as the natural subject of subsequent mystical interpretation. Generally, however, Schweid sees in prophecy reflection of a non-mystical variety, demanding immediate confrontation with the real world, in the here and now, in order to discover the hidden God within it. Thus, for example, the prophets initiated the original Jewish concept of *teshuvah* (repentance) as a typically non-mystical mechanism serving to overcome the disappearance of God in the world. The God of the Prophets is not an abstract God, but One who lives in the world and in history.²⁸

26. See Ithamar Gruenwald's book, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism*, (Leiden-Köln, 1980).

27. Scholem's views on these matters are to be found in his book: *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism* (New York, 1969), 87–90.

28. Schweid, 29–31.

3. The definition of popular religion: Scholem makes a sharp distinction between popular and institutional religion. But the very sharpness of the distinction, Schweid argues, renders even more amazing Scholem's claim that it was popular religion that absorbed the influences of esoteric Kabbalah. If Kabbalah was so esoteric, how was it absorbed? Admittedly, Scholem is not referring here to the complex theosophic doctrines of the Kabbalah and its innermost secrets, but rather to popular customs of a magical character and to varieties of Messianic yearnings. But Schweid finds much more obvious sources of inspiration for these phenomena both within and outside of Judaism which are non-mystical in character. Messianic aspirations, for example, are not necessarily fostered by mysticism, but can be nurtured by internal sources in the prophets and Apocrypha. Likewise, the infiltration of magic and demonology can be viewed as the result of superstitions dominant in the non-Jewish environment. It is possible that there was occasional tension between popular custom and the normative demands of the halakhah, but Rabbinic Judaism always displayed an abundant measure of tolerance and the ability to accommodate itself to heterogeneous needs, as demonstrated by its consideration for popular custom.²⁹

4. The spiritual world of the Rabbis: Despite the literature of Merkabah Mysticism, the major element in the religious experience of the Talmudic period was based upon the contents of prophecy and the Jewish historic myth. This element led to the great emphasis on the importance of Torah scholarship and ethical practices.³⁰

5. The relative importance of Medieval Pietist Literature: Scholem saw this literary genre merely as an extension of philosophy or of Kabbalah. But according to Schweid, even were one to admit the influence of both of these rival systems on this literature, it must nevertheless be treated as an independent discipline, which continues the values of the Rabbinic tradition in its pedagogic aims of communal responsibility and in its preoccupation with the ethical quality of the Jewish myth, whereby closeness to God is achieved via observance of His commandments and subservience to His will.³¹ The most important feature of the Divine commandments (*mitzvot*) is the gesture of obedience, which expresses both fear and love of God and rejects the ascetic tendencies of the mystic.³²

29. Schweid, 42–46.

30. Schweid, 47–49.

31. In all fairness, it should be noted that Scholem's pupil and colleague, Professor Isaiah Tishby, and his disciple, Professor Joseph Dan, have long recognized this point and done much pioneering work in this field in their writings. See, for example: I. Tishby, *Mivhar Sifrut ha-Mussar* (Jerusalem, 1971); J. Dan, *Sifrut ha-Mussar veba-Derush* [*Hebrew Ethical and Homiletical Literature* (Heb.)]. (Jerusalem, 1975).

32. Schweid, 49–58.

6. The evaluation of medieval Jewish philosophy: According to Scholem, philosophy is a false substitute for religion and stems from the world of paganism which first gave rise to Plato and Aristotle.³³ But according to Schweid, there are different sorts of philosophy: the secular variety, which serves as a surrogate religion, and that which succeeds in internalizing the specifically religious dimension in which it developed and, no less than mysticism, succeeds in expressing an intense awareness of the immediacy and vividness of God's presence. Schweid objects to the distinction made by Scholem between symbol as the basic mode of expression of the Kabbalah as opposed to allegory as the tool of the philosopher.³⁴ Both Jewish mysticism and Jewish philosophy rose in reaction to external challenges to Judaism, but philosophy — in Schweid's estimation — related more directly to the realistic situation, whereas Kabbalah introspected its vision while ignoring the concrete setting, thus creating an ever-widening schism between the Jewish people and its surroundings. It was this process which eventually made possible the catastrophic attempt of Sabbateans to grapple with the real-life situation inappropriately by means of totally irrelevant tools.³⁵

7. The understanding of the three major streams which arose after the crisis of Sabbateanism (Haskalah, Zionism, Hassidism): Scholem views these as rechanneling Sabbateanism's basic tenets in new directions. But according to Schweid, while one might be able to trace some biographical connection between some of the disciples of Sabbetai Zvi and individual Hassidim (although Hassidism arose in reaction to that movement), the evidence for direct connection with the Haskalah movement is paltry. As for the connection between Sabbateanism and Zionism— one can only engage in a “homily of parallels”. Sabbateanism was by any standards a negative phenomenon, destructive and pathological, whereas Hassidism, Haskalah and Zionism share a constructive quality, reacting in a realistic manner to the world as it exists.³⁶

8. The contribution of “Wissenschaft des Judentums”: According to Scholem, this school arose out of apologetic tendencies and an overrated emphasis on the importance of rationalism. Schweid sees this as an over-simplification. Antagonism to mysticism, to the extent that it existed among scholars of this school, stemmed not only from the urge for apologetics, but also from their religious and moral world-view, which entailed rejection of the passive reaction of the mystic to the “here” and “now” of this world as the scene of his

33. For references in Scholem's writings, see Schweid, 17–18 and note 22.

34. Schweid, 61; 64–65.

35. Schweid, 66–68.

36. Schweid, 68–72.

responsibilities. There was also a natural antipathy on the part of these scholars towards the homiletical style, which pervaded Kabbalistic and hassidic texts — which they, with their newly discovered appreciation of the value of scientific-critical methods of historic research, tended to regard as a distortion of the original meaning of the texts being treated. For this reason, says Schweid, one can only view Scholem's life-work as the great triumph of the "Wissenschaft des Judentums," which in his work managed to overcome its initial prejudices and treat homiletical literature objectively on its own terms. Scholem's studies actually base themselves on the techniques of the "Wissenschaft des Judentums" once they had become refined, so one can only conclude that Scholem did not recognize the extent to which he was indebted to it for his own methodology.³⁷

9. The future of Jewish thought: In Schweid's opinion, the historic myth of the Exodus, the giving of the Torah, etc., has suffered an immense blow during the past 200 years: on the one hand, due to the development of the scientific study of Judaism which tended to usurp the place of traditional forms of Torah scholarship; and, on the other, because of the harrowing historic experiences which the Jewish people has undergone during this period. The only faction of Judaism which has managed, despite these factors, to maintain its original loyalty to this myth and to authentic forms of religiosity — i.e. Orthodox Judaism — can be typified by its withdrawal from mystical leanings (with the notable exception of the late Rabbi Kook, although even in his case, according to Schweid, his thought has already become stultified in the hands of his Orthodox disciples).³⁸ Yet Scholem's own attitude to this faction, remarks Schweid, is not one of total rejection, but rather of ambivalence. Despite his criticism, Scholem exhibits a curious envy, because it is only this camp that still manages to maintain the fundamentalist belief in the Divine origin of the Torah, which even Scholem sees as indispensable for the continuation of authentic Judaism.³⁹ Here, one would expect that Scholem would finally wake up to the difference between Kabbalistic myth and the myth of the revelation of the Torah, and see in the latter the life-blood of Judaism. But Scholem did not carry his attitudes to their logical conclusion and created the impression that his sympathy for the Orthodox camp stems merely from the fact that he nevertheless saw it as closest to the mystical heart of Judaism, albeit without the courage to shed its inhibitions and develop a full-bodied mysticism. On the other hand, even the secular nature of the Zionist movement is deceptive, and it is likely that it too will eventually bear fruit relating

37. Schweid, 75–81.

38. Schweid, 73.

39. Scholem emphasizes repeatedly throughout his writings the centrality of a fundamentalist belief in the revelation at Sinai to Judaism. See, for example, his article: "Some Thoughts regarding a Theology of Judaism" (Hebrew), in *Devarim be-Go*, 557–568.

to the mystical tradition of the past. In the meantime, all that remains to be done by those interested in furthering continuity, according to Scholem, is the temporary stop-gap of empathetic scientific study of Jewish sources, particularly those of mysticism, until the inevitable reappearance of a new creative mystical outburst.⁴⁰

Schweid agrees with Scholem that any attempt to salvage loyalty to the Jewish heritage, despite the crisis of modernity, involves holding on to whatever remains of the historic myth and of halakhah as are intellectually and practically feasible. But he believes there is no necessity for Scholem's assumption that the belief in revelation must continue to be interpreted in a fundamentalist manner, or that it is within the power of mysticism to return us to such an interpretation. This is so since the mystic sources have ceased to relate to our questions, and even the picture of the natural, cosmic, social, political and historic reality which these sources paint bears no resemblance to the reality that appears before us. Schweid rejects the hints in Scholem's writings of a parallel between the period of time which elapsed between the Spanish Expulsion and the outburst of Lurianic Kabbalah and the 200-year period which spans the crisis of the modern age, following which Scholem anticipates a new outburst of mystical creativity.⁴¹ We now live in a dynamic period of constant, rapid change. If the long anticipated outburst has not yet occurred, it seems highly unlikely that it ever will, and the national attempt at rebuilding its religious tradition finds more relevance in the vessel of philosophy than in that of mysticism.⁴²

I have no wish here to enter into a detailed discussion of the issue between Schweid and Scholem regarding the nine topics which I have listed. These, as well as other points at issue between them, which I have not found it necessary to list here, are surely enough to offer a challenge to Scholem's disciples to answer Schweid by detailed studies which go beyond the mere dry dissection of texts

40. Schweid testifies that Scholem often expressed these ideas orally.

41. Scholem, "Reflections Regarding the Possibility of Jewish Mysticism in Our Times", *op. cit.* 74–75. This type of prognosis on the part of Scholem is additional evidence of his sympathy with a historicism of a quasi-Marxist or Hegelian sort.

42. Schweid, 87. It would seem here that Schweid is championing Philosophy as opposed to Mysticism. But, as with Scholem's mysticism (see note 15), so with Schweid — philosophy is not the whole story. For, despite rejection of its Divine Authority, the role of halakhah (or some practical traditions deriving from halakhah) seems to be central in the philosophy of history which Schweid is defending, together with a morality based on "this-worldly" activism and a realistic view of Man and his relationship with his surroundings. Schweid (85) cites Ludwig Steinheim and Samuel Hirsh as pioneers of this new kind of theology, which has been further developed in the 20th century (by such people as Hermann Cohen, no doubt) and which he sees as the most legitimate brand of Jewish continuity in our times because it is at once intellectually respectable, practical and authentic.

which has been their wont.⁴³ In bringing Schweid's interesting and important monograph to the attention of scholars and students, I would merely like to add that Schweid too writes from a certain historical-ideological viewpoint, which must also be checked against the facts — as he himself would no doubt readily admit. It cannot be denied that Scholem has contributed some valid and very important revisions to the generally accepted sketch of Jewish thought and its place in the history of Judaism, by reclaiming the irrational, mythic elements in Jewish tradition and calling our attention to the pantheistic tendencies which were interwoven into the more purist brand of monotheism that served as the staple diet of popular as well as Talmudic Judaism. We now possess a considerably revised and less monolithic picture of the nature of Jewish religiosity, with all the complexities and subtleties arising out of the fabric of conflicting views. It is no longer possible to return to the monotonous whitewashed image of Judaism presented by the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* over the last century, which chose to erase all mention of any phenomena embarrassing to its preconceived notions.

But whatever may be the outcome of the scholarly discussion of the challenges which Schweid has put to Scholem's disciples, Schweid's criticisms should be recognized by them as well as serving a valuable purpose: first, in emphasizing the importance of anti-spiritualist, normative Halakhah and the adoption of this-worldly religious solutions as the main pattern of Judaism, and as a model which bears positive religious values and not only as an external, restraining shell; second, in challenging Scholem's Hegelian philosophy of history which sees mysticism, particularly when coupled with Messianic leanings, as a sort of time-bomb which of necessity must explode at regular intervals in nihilistic, anti-nomian outbursts. By making these two points, Schweid restores a certain measure of balance lacking in Scholem's one-sided view of mysticism and its place in Jewish religious life, for which we owe him a debt of gratitude.

Immanuel 18 (Fall 1984)

43. As this article goes to press, a new issue of *Mehqerey Yerushalayim be-Mahshevet Yisrael*, 3 (1984), has appeared, including Joseph Dan's lengthy response to Schweid's book: "Gershom Scholem — History and Historiosophy" (Heb.), p. 427–475, as well as shorter reactions by N. Rotenstreich, p. 477–488 and H. Lazarus-Yaffe, 489–492. A cursory glance gives the impression that Dan's response does indeed offer a serious critique which demands as detailed a scrutiny as does Schweid's monograph itself.