PREFACE

In the past decade the study of Jewish mysticism has taken a decidedly contemporary turn. Scholars of the kabbalistic tradition fully trained in the languages and nomenclature of classical Kabbalah have in some sense subverted the thesis of the great master Gershom Scholem, who argued that secularism and secularity have made authentic Jewish mysticism all but impossible today. Scholarly essays and books have begun exploring the subterranean cloisters of Jerusalem's *haredi* (ultra-Orthodox) neighborhoods where Kabbalah not only serves the banal function of being part of Israel's *haredi* civil religion but is a living and breathing art that thrives and flourishes among young adepts in search of the life the texts describe.

This new kabbalistic activity is not an isolated phenomenon but part of a larger realignment of *haredi* Judaism toward the world around it. It is part of a move “inward” that is also outward, taking tentative yet also courageous steps outside a world whose imaginary (and concrete) walls no longer protect it from the Zionist project and the secular spiritual renaissance that has seeped into the noisy study-halls and dimly-lit apartments of Jerusalem neighborhoods such as *Tel Arza*, *Geulah*, and *Meah Shearim*. Many members of these largely closed circles come from, or have connections to, the outside world. Increasing numbers of *haredim* in Israel dwell outside the Hasidic Eastern European binaries of religious and secular that informed both camps (the *haredim* and the secular) for generations. This does not necessarily manifest itself as tolerance. Yet even the more rigid and intolerant world we sometimes see in the news speaks to a new development that has largely cut its ties with its European past.

This book is not a study of that world, but uses one dimension of these shifting sands to make a larger point about the ways in which “New *Haredism*” is making a contribution to a mystical renaissance in Israel.

Aubrey Glazer's interests are not anthropological but metaphysical. For him, culture veils a more internal movement where different worlds are unwittingly getting closer, not farther apart. He uses this new phenomenon to explore the metaphysics of what has thus far largely been examined through cultural analysis. More significant, however, is the way he confronts the relationship between mysticism and poetry in a way few have done before.

Scholars of mysticism have often commented on the apparent symmetry between mysticism and poetry; the phenomenological symbiosis and the shared temperament between the mystic and the poet. Poets themselves recognize this, and mystics often try their hand at poetry, assuming their vocation bleeds naturally into the other. The success of this endeavor, or more often the lack thereof, notwithstanding, the poet and the mystic indeed share a common psychic space. Both poet and mystic attempt to express the subtleties of human experience and the excess of human emotion through language with full knowledge that the only tools at their disposal, words, ultimately fail to adequately illustrate the vicissitudes of the inner world they seek to describe. From Dante to Rilke to Whitman, poets view the mystical as some kind of home, however elusive and however strange. And mystics from Eckhart to Rumi to Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook view poetry as an expressive form that they feel coheres with their project of communicating transcendence through immanence. The mystic and the poet are failures, but in that failure emerges a precious gift for us; a guide to the very margins of dualism where we can, perhaps, gaze over the precipice (or witness them gazing over the precipice) where the many and the one, or the real and the imagined, or the corporeal and the nothingness, converge. All this has little to do with belief and even less to do with doctrine. The categories and life of normative religion are left in the villages. The mystics and poets prefer the forest and the desert.

Glazer's protagonist in this book is a young enigmatic *haredi* rabbi named Yitzhaq Maier Morgenstern, almost unknown even among scholars of Kabbalah. For many years he published his work anonymously under the title *Yam ha-Hokhma* (*Sea of Wisdom*). He was raised in England in a *haredi* community and immigrated to Israel as a young man. For Glazer, Morgenstern represents a figure on the margin, one who remains deeply embedded in the traditional world of his upbringing, yet one for whom

the search for the mystical life, and not merely the study of mystical texts, has brought him to yet another precipice, one that overlooks the horizons of the universal mystical quest. While Morgenstern does not venture far beyond the classical texts he reads and his knowledge of other mystical traditions is not openly discussed in his writings, in this reading of him, Glazer pulls him beyond the confines of the study hall and situates him in the changing world of contemporary Israel. While Morgenstern would hardly recognize himself as a “post-Zionist,” Glazer illustrates how the mystical quest takes us beyond the confines of the Zionist project, to a place beyond ethnicity, nationalism, and the opaque borders of collective identity. Glazer sees Morgenstern as an example of how contemporary *haredi* spirituality is contributing, however unwittingly, to a new sense of communal self-fashioning that can potentially move us beyond the binaries of “us” verses “them” (religious/secular, Jew/Arab, Zionist/Diasporist) and into a “politics” of non-dualism that may turn us away from the cliff we seem unable to avoid. On this path, Morgenstern, or perhaps Glazer’s Morgenstern, meets some unexpected travelers along the way, individuals who live in his own back yard, strangers he knew nothing about but, when they meet in these pages, between these pages, he (and they) realize they know each other intimately.

The real contribution of this book lies in this unpredicted, and unpredictable, meeting. After situating Morgenstern as a part, albeit somewhat marginal, in the spiritual revolution of new kabbalism in Israel – a renaissance Morgenstern largely views through the narrow lens of his own *bevraya* (spiritual community)—Glazer introduces his readers to figures many have never heard of, even those who reside in Israel. Contemporary Israeli poets such as Admiel Kosman, Avraham ben Yitzhak, Benjamin Shevili, Tamar Elad-Appelbaum, Haya Esther, among others. Some are religious, some are secular, some are both, some are neither. But they are all Hebrew poets, they all breath the Hebrew language, they all draw from the fictive, mythic, imaginary tradition that Morgenstern and his disciples live in as if it were as tangible as a fresh persimmon from the *shuk* on Friday afternoon. In these pages, through sometimes labyrinthine and often illuminating readings of their poetry, these heretics, blasphemers, subversives, and denigrators of all that is holy meet a middle-aged Hasidic mystic in the very place where they all make their home, on the Cliff of

the Many that overlooks the vastness of the One, or the nothing, or Nothing, that stretches past the horizon. In the Holy Land that cries the tears of exile. Glazer himself is a kind of participant-observer, a lonely traveler between these two worlds; a *shadkhan* (matchmaker), a *meturgemon* (translator), a *mezayer milin* (painter of words).

This book may leave some scholars scratching their heads and it may leave spiritual seekers barely treading water in the long scholarly footnotes and academic jargon. Perhaps some scholars need to consider that there is also important work to be done beyond delineating context and tracing influence, and seekers need to realize that none of this comes easy. This is a challenging book not only because its content—the mystical, the poetic and what lies between—is elusive, but also because the meetings on these pages, the juxtapositions between a *haredi* mystic and atheistic ones who can't help writing about a God they don't believe in, are not obvious. But isn't that the point of poetry and mysticism? They are not obvious, they both stretch language far beyond language's own comfort zone. Most of us never do get past the "many" to whatever, if anything, lies beyond. But we are inspired by those who try nonetheless. Perhaps it is in that very act of trying that we as humans continue to grow.

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