61. Sign conceptions in the Judaic tradition

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1. The corpus of relevant writings

Though the Bible contains no explicit discourse on the sign, implicit reflections on signs are present in the Torah, as well as in the Prophetic books of the Bible and in other canonical writings. “Torah” is the name for the Pentateuch, the first five scrolls of the Bible. The word “Torah” denotes the teaching par excellence. It includes doctrine and practice, dogma, and morals. Yet, the Bible is also a historical chronicle of the Jewish people.

1.1. The written and the oral Torah

The Pentateuch is often referred to as the written Torah. The term “oral Torah” denotes the body of all possible interpretations and commentaries to the written Torah. The Rabbinical tradition has it that the actual Torah was communicated to Moses by God together with the body of all its possible interpretations. So the “orality” referred to is the “orality of God” on Sinai. The oral Torah represents the sum total of meaning encapsulated in the Holy Text. It consists of such texts as the Talmud and of all the interpretations yet to come. In Rabbinical Judaism, the two Torahs are one.

The Talmud is not a single unified text but was built around a compilation of legal precepts, the Mishnah, and contains the debates and commentaries that developed between the rabbis while discussing this central body. Whereas the Mishnah was written in pure Hebrew, the commentaries were written in Aramaic, the lingua franca of Jews in Palestine and Babylon during the first centuries. The Talmud is essentially a legal treatise. It deals with the Law governing the everyday life of the Jews, the halakha. Treatises of special importance for an implicit ‘Jewish theory of the sign are the Soferim (‘Scribes’), which deal with the textual procedures to be used when copying the Torah, and the ‘Avodah Zarah’, which expounds the techniques to be used in order to “annul” pagan idols. Later work, the Tikkunei Soferim, or ‘corrections for the Scribes’, is certainly of some importance. Notwithstanding its primarily legal character, the Talmud also contains homilies, apologetics, metaphysical speculation, as well as folk tales and legends, the Agaddah.

The reign of the Byzantine emperors over Palestine led to the closing down of the Talmudic academies. It was then that the midrashim, commentaries on the Biblical text following in more or less chronological order the events in the Bible, were compiled. “Midrash” goes back to a root meaning ‘homily’.

In Talmudic times, Aramaic had substituted Hebrew as the vernacular of the people.
Therefore, translations had to be introduced. The oldest official translation of the Torah was called "Targum" ('translation') and is supposed to have been written by a proselyte named Onkelos, active in the second century of the Christian Era (C.E.). Nevertheless, to some Talmudic Rabbis translating the sacred language was anathema (Levine 1982). The Targumim are especially remarkable because of their toning down or even suppressing of expressions considered excessively "anthropomorphous" with reference to God. Thus, they refer to God as "Memra", 'the Word', whenever the rendering of the tetragrammaton (YHWH) by "The Lord" would make God act in the same manner as man. Some 'translators' may have been aware of the Gnostic conception of God as Lógos.

1.2. Antique Jewish philosophy

One of the people to be influenced by this lógos conception of the Scriptures was Philo of Alexandria (ca. 20 B.C.—40 C.E.). He wrote that "[Moses] would say that the Intelligible World is nothing else than the Divine Lógos engaged in the act of building the cosmos [...]. This is Moses' teaching, not mine: for in his description of man's creation in the sequel he explicitly acknowledges that he was molded after the image of God (Gen. 1.27). Now if the part is an image of an image, and the whole form, this entire sensible world, since it is greater than the human image, is a copy of the divine image, it is clear that the archetypal seal, which we declare to be the intelligible world, must be the very Lógos of God" (Op. 24–25, cf. Winston 1985: 100).

According to Philo, Moses or Abraham spoke with God, yet not through any structured language: they had the unmediated language of the soul at their disposal. This was "internal lógos". Philo's work is, in fact, a transposition of the distinction established by the Stoics (cf. Art. 40 § 3.2.3.) between internal and external lógos.

1.3. The kabbalistic writings

Esoteric doctrines were not absent from the Talmud. They are grouped under two headings: Ma'aseh Bereshit (Interpretations of the Book of Genesis) and Ma'aseh Merkabah (Interpretations revolving around Ezekiel's vision of the Heavenly Chariot). Other texts form the Hechalot and Si'ur Komah writings. The latter is a treatise purporting to describe the "Measure of Divine Stature", the true "body" of the Divinity. The first speculative work of medieval mystics was the Book of Creation, Sefer Yeširah. The keynote of this work is contained in its opening statement: "By means of thirty-two mysterious paths did the Eternal engrave and establish His name and create His world [...]" (Epstein 1964: 227). The paths are explained as the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet together with ten Sefirot ('numbers', cf. Arabic sifr, English cypher) representing the "spheres" of divine attributes. The second speculative masterpiece of the theoretical Kabbalah is the Book of Splendor, the Zohar, thought to have been compiled from heterogeneous sources by Moses de Leon in the thirteenth century. The Zohar takes the form of a commentary on the Pentateuch. To make his existence perceptible, God is said to have projected his infinite self in the form of ten channels of light. They are the sefirot: Keter 'Crown', Ḥokmah 'Wisdom', Binah 'Understanding', Ḥesed 'Love', Gerurah 'Might', Tiferet 'Beauty', Netzah 'Victory', Hod 'Majesty', Yesod 'Foundation', Malkut 'Kingdom'. These kabbalistic works are pervaded with truly linguistic reflections. For the Sefer Yeširah, all the letters of the alphabet were active agents in bringing about the Creation. They fall into three groups represented respectively by 1. the soft breathing alef(a) 2. the mute mem (m) and 3. the hissing sin (sh sound). a represents air, m water, sh the hissing fire. In the beginning, these cosmic entities had no material existence. They received it by becoming letters, which made creation possible. Thus, the Creation was concomitant with the Text, a quasi-textual phenomenon.

1.4. Medieval Jewish philosophy

The 'pre-semitic' attitude of medieval Jewish philosophy is essentially Aristotelian (cf. Art. 40 § 3.2. and Art. 42 § 2.1.3.). Thus, the semantics of Maimonides (1135—1204) rests on the Aristotelian basis (cf. Berman 1974: 170f, Klein-Braslavy 1978) found in the work of Ibn Sinai (Avicenna, 980—1037), and above all in that of Al Farabi (ca. 870—950; cf. Art. 90 § 12.). A central idea of his is that there is an inner semantic development in language that goes from concreteness to abstraction. His typology of word types based on the syllogistic dialectics of accidens versus essentia is also found in Al Farabi: there are words whose definition gives part of the essence of the object designated while others manifest an essential split between signified and signifier (cf. the ancient Greek discussion
of the ‘correctness’ of names, Art. 40 § 3.2.). Maimonides translated the syllogistic concept in terms of the Biblical term Μοφή (see below § 2.3.4.). The originality of Maimonides stems, on the one hand, from his applying Aristotelian and Al Farābī semantics to the Biblical text (Maimonides was totally unaware of similar efforts being undertaken in the realm of Christianity; cf. Art. 49 and Art. 52) and, on the other, from his heuristic method based on etymologizing techniques that link together various semantic fields to create contextual unity (cf. Art. 56 § 1.). Thus, Satan is linked to setiyah (from the root “st” “to deviate”). Etymology is impressed in the service of rationalistic explanation just as it had been impressed in the service of esoterism by the Kabbalists.

2. Sign names and sign concepts in the Torah

The Bible lends itself naturally to the ternary division between icon, index and symbol established by C. S. Peirce (cf. Art. 100). Icons are based on resemblance between the object designated and its representamen, indices on contact between the object designated and its representamen. Symbols are based on established codes.

2.1. Symbols

In many respects the Bible culs its symbols from the symbolic bestiary and the flora of the antique world (on animal symbolism in other traditions cf. Art. 37 § 7.1.). Thus the Bull was, conventionally, equivalent with strength; the Lion bore the attributes of royalty, strength, courage, generosity; the Lord is called “Abhir Ya’akov Yisrael” ‘Bull of Jacob’, ‘Bull of Israel’ (Gen. 49,24; Isa. 1,24; 49,26; 60,16; 132,2,5). This symbolic code may be based on that of the Canaanites. Similarly, the image of the Lion became the symbol of the tribe of Judah (Gen. 49,9). Lions are also symbols of exegetic activity in Ps. 104,21: “The young lions roar after their prey, and seek their meat from God.” Doubtless the ‘prey’, here, is hidden religious truth. Notwithstanding the great quantity of such images in the Bible, symbols may not be the most interesting species of signs it contains. Its textually dynamic quality is, rather, due to the inherent conflict between its iconicity in regard to the “person” of God and the anti-iconic constraints through which it maintains a state of permanent repression on icons.

2.2. Iconicity

2.2.1. Zelem

The Torah begins with a statement on iconicity that puts to the fore the notion of likeness or resemblance as central principle. What is more, this “likeness” and “resemblance” links man to God. Thus, Gen. 1,26 reports one of the first pronouncements of God: “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness” (“be-šilmeni ki-demutenu”). Indeed, the first words referring to a sign conception in the Torah are the two words “uttered by God”, “šelem” and “demut”. These two words often seem interchangeable. “Be-demut” or “ke-demut” (“in the resemblance of”) is to be found in Gen. 1,26; whereas Gen. 5,1–3 has “be-silmo”. “Demut” stems from the root “dmh” “to resemble’ (Jes. 1,9 “as in Gomorrha”, Ps. 102,6 “I resemble the owl in the desert” or 144,4 “the days (of man) resemble a shadow that passeth away”). In all probability, “šelem” is derived from the Hebrew root “šl” “shadow”. Gershom Scholem (1897–1982), speaking about the origin of yet another term, golum, quotes the words of an anonymous Spanish Kabbalist who held to the ‘shadow’ origin of “šelem”: “When the rabbis say: a childless man is like a dead man, this means like a golum (lifeless matter) without form. Consequently, pictures on a painted wall are of this nature, for although they have the form of a man, they are called only “šelem” (‘image’, here in the sense of reflection, derived from “šel” ‘shadow’ and ‘form’). When (the Talmudist) Rava created a man, he made a figure in the form of a man by virtue of the combinations of letters, but he could not give him the real likeness of a man (demut)” (Scholem 1965: 194). In this context, too, ‘shadow’ is seen as the “etymology” of “šelem”. Thus, in the views of specific Kabbalists, man is a sort of shadow of God. Demut, on the contrary, corresponds to ruah, that is to the pneuma insufflated by Gnostic God. Philo of Alexandria writes: “In the shadow of God”: but God’s creation is his Lògos, which he used as an instrument and thus created the world. This shadow is [...] the archetype of other things. For just as God is the Pattern of the Image, which was just named ‘Shadow’, so does the Image become the pattern of others, as Moses made clear at
the beginning of the Law by saying: ‘And God made man after the Image of God’ (Gen. 1:27); thus the Image had been modeled after God, but man after the Image, which had acquired the force of a pattern” (Liber legum allegiorum 3:96; quoted by Winston 1981: 101).

2.2.2. Tavnit

A sign-term of tremendous importance is “tavnit” (“tabnît”) from the root “bnh”, which means ‘building’ and also ‘plan’ or ‘blueprint’ and is related to the action of building or planning houses or structures, including textual structures. Thus, Moses on Mount Sinai is commanded to build according to the tavnit shown him by God on Sinai (the command is made more forceful by repetition in Ex. 25.4–8 and 40.26–30, as well as Num. 3.4): “And let them build a sanctuary; that I may dwell among them. According to all that I shew them, after the pattern [tavnit] of the tabernacle, and the pattern [tavnit] of all the instruments thereof, even so shall ye make it” (Ex. 25.8–9). “And look that ye make them after their pattern [be-tavnitam] which was shown thee in the mount” (Ex. 25.40). In Old Testament usage tavnit occurs in seventeen places. The Koehler–Baumgartner Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti libros gives 1) the general meaning ‘shape’, ‘figure’; then, 2) Ex. 25.9 and 40.26ff: ‘pattern’ (cf. German Urbild); 3) Dt. 4.16–18 and Jos. 22.28: ‘image’ (Abbild); 4) II Kings 16.10, Ps. 144.12 and I Chronicles 28.11ff and 18ff: ‘model’; 5) Ht. 8.3 and Ps. 120.6: ‘image’ (Bild); 7) I Chronicle 28.19: ‘architect’s plan’. Abbild, here, is the wrong term, since it is associated with the prohibition of the first Commandment, Dt. 4.16–18, which paraphrases Ex. 20.1–3 and Dt. 5.6–7. On the contrary, one may say that tavnit does not generally transgress the Law against the making of images. Indeed, in II Kings 16.10 what seems intended is “representation by a model”. King Achaz wanted a sketch or model of the altar. As against Koehler–Baumgartner’s interpretation of “tavnit” in Ps. 144.12, it is clear that tavnit is understood. ‘And it is therefore good heed unto yourselves; for you saw no manner of similitude [temunah] on the day that the Lord spake unto you in Horeb, out of the midst of the fire, lest ye corrupt yourselves and make you a graven image [pesel], the similitude [temunah] of any figure, the likeness [tavnit] of any beast that is on the earth [...]”. Yet, what this passage indicates is a displacement of emphasis from the finished product to the process of construction itself: the Children of Israel looked at a tavnit (‘blueprint’) in order to create the “similitudes” of beasts.

2.2.3. The Torah as tavnit

The sacred character of tavnit was brought to the fore by the mystical tradition which situated the origin of the world and of Nature in the Torah, that is, the Ur-Text, a textual object of pure antiquity and pure genetic power. “Created” before the world (some mi-

drashim say “a thousand years before the world”), the Torah was the blueprint by which God created Heaven and Earth. Thus, one can read in Genesis Rabbah: “The Torah says: I was the tool of the Holy One blessed be He. In the manner of the world, if a king builds a palace, he does not build it out of his own mind, but he has lists and registers, in order to know where to put the rooms and where to put the wickets. In the same way, God looked at the Torah and created the world” (Genesis Rabbah 1.1).

Rabbinal exegesis often hold that the first word of Genesis, “bereshit”, introduces the Torah (the text itself) as speaker. The phrase is interpreted as meaning “By me [bereshit] God created heaven and earth [...]”. This midrashic interpretation was later repeated by the Kabbalists in a variety of forms, such as this passage in the Zohar: “[...] He [God] was looking at the Torah, at every word of it, and made in accordance with it a constructed thing [omanah] in the world, because all the things and all that is made in all the worlds are in the Torah. And this is why God looked at the Torah and created the world. [...]” and if you say, who can be a constructor [oman] in the case of God? To this we respond that the looking of God was in the following way. As it is written in the Torah: ‘In the beginning God created the Heaven and Earth’. He looked at that word and created Heaven. In the Torah it is written: ‘And God said, Let there be Light’, He looked at that word and created the light, and so with every word that is written in the
Torah, God looked at it and made the particular thing” (Zohar Terumah 161 a). The prototypal Torah was subsequently copied by Moses on Mount Sinai. In the 13th century Rambam (the Kabbalist Rabbi Moses ben Nahman) repeated the above midrash in his Introduction to the Book of Genesis: “The Torah preceded the creation of the world, and it was written in black fire over white fire, and Moses was like a scribe who copies an ancient book” (quoted by Newman 1969: 23). Simultaneously, the Kabbalists emphasized the idea of the identity between God and his Holy Writ, the Torah. Thus Recanati: “Before the creation of the world only God and his Name existed. God himself is the Torah, for the Torah is not external to him and He is not external to the Torah” (Scholem 1970: 44). Such a theory seems to be prefigured by Philo’s “copulation of God with his own knowledge”.

2.2.4. Šurah, šurāt

In Maimonides’ Hilkhot Yesedel Ha-Torah 7.1, the šurāt are the separate layers of intellect, that is, the “angels”. The word šurah is of great antiquity. In the Sefer Bahir, compiled in the 13th century but probably dating back to the 6th or 7th century, šurah is explicitly said to be a form (morphe) purified of all earthly matter (hyle). Maimonides revived the concept in his Hilkhot Yesedel Ha-Torah. These angelic forms surround the “divine throne”. And this “throne”, in turn, is the sphere of creation (Harvey 1981). It is not impossible that Maimonides should have viewed the organization of the layers of intellectual forms in the manner in which Ptolemaic geographers saw the encapsulating of the cosmic spheres within one another.

In the Book of Homilies the Spanish mystic and Biblical scholar Ibn Shueib (first half of the 14th century) exposes the possibility of a non-figurative interpretation of the sacred text: “There can be no doubt that these forms [šeyyuriim] carry a mystical significance [...] but their most important significance is that the forms [šurāt] of the tabernacle were like mental forms [šurāt] [...]” (B. Menahot on Ex. 26.30). Finally, for medieval mysticism, the “form” of the angels was that of the Hebrew letters (Idel 1986: 2–15).

2.2.5. Anti-iconicity: pesel and temunah

Notwithstanding its opening statements concerning iconicity and the divine privilege of creation through iconicity (in Exodus), the Torah introduced anti-iconic laws. Exodus contains two words relating to visual signs, pesel and temunah. The anti-iconic statements expressing these concepts are explicitly “uttered” by God in the context of the first commandment, after he introduced himself to Moses as “The Lord thy God, which have brought thee out of the Land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage”. The Torah verse reads: “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image [pesel], or any likeness [temunah] of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth” (Ex. 20.3–4). Thus, notwithstanding the fact that the Torah opens on a profession of iconicity as a method of creation, the first commandment is tantamount to a strict anti-iconic stance. The creating of icons (pesel and temunah), based as they are on likeness, that is on the likeness with God, is now the object of a strict prohibition. The Torah describes the creation of icons based on resemblance as the exclusive faculty of God. As we shall see later (cf. § 3.), the whole Jewish attitude concerning the sign, down to modern times, seems to have been impregnated by this original tension between icon making and the interdiction of it. (A similar tension also occurs in Christian Antiquity, cf. Art. 47 § 7.7., the Greek Middle Ages, cf. Art. 60 § 4.7., and Protestant Reformation, cf. Art. 72 § 1.1., as well as in the Islamic World, cf. Art. 90 § 10.; see also Art. 33 § 3.) Producing images through resemblance can only be the privilege of the invisible God; for man is left the realm of non-iconic or antionic sign-production. Indeed, the medieval poet Yehuda Halevi claimed that the sin connected with the adoration of the golden calf was not its worshippers but its making. Another word quasi-synonymous with “pesel” or “temunah” is “Maskit” (Num. 33.52), usually translated as ‘Image’ or ‘Statue’ (in German: Bild, Gebilde).

“Semel”, probably derived from the Greek “symbolon”, is sometimes used as a synonym for “pesel” or “temunah” as in Ez. 8.3,5, where the expression “semel hakin’ah” is used by Ezekiel as ‘idol’ in his stigmatization of idolatry.

As mentioned above there is one instance (Dt. 4.16–18) in which “tavmit” is used as synonymous with “pesel” and “temunah” despite its normally non-iconic content.

2.2.6. The rationale behind the prohibition Iconicity seems to have been the cardinal sin. No concept, and therefore no “image” can be made of God. Man is already a “concept”
and an “image” referring to God — since he was made “in his likeness” — and therefore no statue or picture must be made of him. The God of the Torah enjoys the privilege of total invisibility. It is not that visibility and the sense of sight do not fill a prominent place in the Torah, as witnessed by the abundance of terms referring to visual signs. Yet, simultaneously, the Bible seems to be wary of its own occlusionism. It insists on the essential non-visibility of God. Deuteronomy (4:12) says: “And they [the Israelites] saw the voices [on Mount Sinai].” They “saw” but did not “hear” them, perhaps because the essential non-visibility of voices is a textual guarantee that no taboo was transgressed, that God remained unseen. According to the medieval commentator Rashi, an anathema against iconicity and resemblance is to be seen behind the enigmatic phrase. He writes: “And the Eternal spake unto you out of the midst of the fire: ye heard the voice of the words, but saw no similitude; only ye heard a voice” (Pentateuch 1934: 25). The mistrust of “sight” is also reflected in the numerous punishments inflicted upon those who transgress specific prohibitions of seeing. Thus, the wife of Lot was turned into a statue for looking back.

2.2.7. Incest as “seeing” and as textual transgression

The Torah prohibits the seeing of specific particulars, e.g., the genitals of relatives. Ham, the son of Noah, was cursed for looking at his father’s nakedness (i.e., seeing the genitals of his father). The sin of Noah is termed “giliyu arayot” “uncovering of genitals”. In Hebrew, it is this term that is used for “incest”. Thus, incest, in the Jewish acception of the term, has to do with looking and viewing. This terminology seems to be transferrable to the prohibition against an excess of exegetic zeal. Thus, it is said in the Talmud that the Biblical text has 71 panim (“faces”). It would be dangerous to “uncover” more.

2.3. Indexicality

2.3.1. Selom as index

If man is a sort of “shadow of God”, it is sometimes the converse view which prevails, namely that God is “like a shadow to man”. Thus a midrash concerning the reciprocal presence of God to man and of man to God is mentioned in the Tola’at Yaakov by Rabbi Meir Ibn Gabby (first half of the 15th century); “What is the meaning of Ehyeh asher Ehyeh [I am that I am]? Just as you are present with me, so I am present with you. Likewise David said: ‘The Lord is thy shadow upon thy right hand.’ What does (this) mean? Like thy shadow: just as thy shadow laughs back when you laugh to it, and weeps if you weep to it, and if you show it an angry face or a pleasant face, so it returns, so is the Lord, the Holy One blessed be He, thy shadow. Just as you are present with Him, so he is present with you” (Idel 1988: 175). Man is an index to the divinity just as insofar as the divinity is an index pointing to the presence of man.

2.3.2. Ot

Biblical Hebrew uses the word “ot” as a synonym for a sign given by God or as a sign addressed to God. But “ot” is also the name for “a letter” (of the alphabet). The direct or indirect author of an “ot” is almost always God. In the Torah, “ot” refers to an oracle or an omen by which God guaranteed that He had entrusted a person with a special assignment of mission (Ex. 3,12 and 4,8–9,17,28,30; Judg. 6,17; 1 Sam. 10,7,9), or that His might stands behind the enterprise of specific individuals (1 Sam. 14,10), or that specific future events will come true (1 Sam. 2,34; II Kings 19,29; 20,8–9; Is. 7,11 and 14; 37,30; 38,7–8 and 22; Jer. 44,29). “Ot” also designates the omens of heathen and pagan peoples, often astronomical ones (Jer. 10,2). It may be a synonym for “evidence” as in Job 21,29 and in Ez. 14,8. It is a mark of distinction, the emblem of the tribes in Sinai; sometimes a “blood mark” as in the case of Cain (Gen. 4,15) or as a sign painted over the Israelite houses in Egypt (Ex. 12,13). In a specific context, the word “ot” designates God’s miraculous interventions. It is the sign of his power and of the particular bond which unites him with the people of Israel (Ex. 7,3; 8,19; 10,1–2; Num. 14,11–12; Dt. 4,34; 6,22; 7,19; 11,3; 26,8; 29,2; 34,11; Josh. 24,17; Jer. 32,20 and 21; Ps. 78,43; 105,27; 135,9). By virtue of its designating simultaneously the “letter” in a text and the ostension of portents, “ot” functions as a “shifter”. On the one hand it designates the sacred signs in the sacred language of things and portents; on the other it designates the minimal textual units (the letters) which compose the text describing these very things — their blueprint.
2.3.3. siman
In Rabbinical Hebrew, “ot” is very often replaced by “siman”, derived from the Greek “sémelón” (Jenni 1971: VI, 199–268).

2.3.4. Mofet
A sign is called “mofet” when it designates the wondrous intervention of a form of divine sign communicated to a specific individual. “Mofet” is sometimes used in the sense of an astronomical omen (as in II Kings 19,29; 20,8–9 and in Isa. 7,11; 14,37; 30,38), but is more frequent in the sense of ‘wonder’ or ‘miracle’.

2.3.5. The individual Jew as index
A symbolic act like circumcision (Gen. 17,11) is called “ot brit” ‘sign of the covenant’ because it is guaranteed by a covenant with God and signifies this covenant. It is an index of the Jew’s alliance with God. Not only the birth of the Jew followed by circumcision but also his death through martyrdom was an index. Such a death is often designated as “kidduš ha-Šem” (‘for the Glorification of God’). Therein it is very similar to the Greek concept “mártys” (‘witness’). In modern Judaism, a series of external marks designate the practising Jew: the yarmulke or kippa he wears on his head, the šēir, a short vest worn under his shirt whose four fringes appear under his coat. Similarly, the house of the Jew is designated to all eyes by a mezuza affixed on the door (see below § 4.).

3. Judaism as conflict between iconic and anti-iconic tendencies: the Scripture as “body”
From the very beginning, iconic and anti-iconic tendencies have coexisted in Judaism. Thus, the Kabbalah seems to answer a need of the Jewish mind, laboring under the weight of the interdiction of drawing an image of God, for transferring the iconic principle to textuality. It is as though the impossibility of producing icons and making use of the iconic principle found a sort of ‘outlet’ in dealing with the textuality of the Torah and treating the Scripture as though it were an icon. With the Kabbalah, and especially the late Kabbalah, this textuality became both cosmic and anthropomorphic: the world was primarily regarded as a text, and man was turned into a text. Conversely, the text took on anthropomorphic aspects; the tetragrammaton itself became a “man”, or sometimes a series of “eyes”; some texts became hands; letters had a “face” with eyes and mouth (cf. Fig. 61.1).

Letters became men: “The Torah has a head a body a heart a mouth and other organs, in the same way as Israel” (Tikkun Zohar, cited by Scholem 1970: 47). Just as in the body of a man there are limbs and joints, just as some organs of the body are more, others less vital, so it seems to be with the Torah” (Azriel, Perus Aggadot: 37, quoted in Scholem 1970: 45; cf. Fig. 61.2).

The Zohar sees the origin of the cosmos in the duality between λόγος and the divinity. It claims that God created the world because his name was contained within Him preventing Him from being a total unity. It was in order that His name should be known to Him that he created the world as a part distinct from him. This creation was brought about by the manifestation of the Sefirot. Thus, the birth of the world was also the “birth of the tetragrammaton”. When the Seferah Hokhmah became manifest, so too was the letter (Yod). The manifestation of the Seferah Binah brought along the letter H (He) usually referred to as the first or upper He. The third letter (Vav), is symbolic of the heavens and was made manifest along with the Seferah Hesed through Yesod inclusive. The second or lower He symbolically represents the earth and came into existence along with the Seferah Malkut. The tetragrammaton (YHWY) contains the whole of the sefirotic configuration: the point of the Yod is the Seferah Keter (‘the Crown’); the Yod itself is Hokhmah (‘Wisdom’); the first He is the Se-
Fig. 61.2: Late kabbalistic text (Warsaw, C. B. Cymerman, 1864). From Halevi 1979: 69.

3.1. The letters of the Torah

The tetragrammaton is represented as a man by the Kabbalists. Yet, not only the “Name” but also the individual letters of the Hebrew alphabet were actually seen as “men”. In a
midraś the letters are the instruments of the creation of the world: “God said, I need workers. The Torah replied, I shall put at your disposal twenty-two workers, the twenty-two letters of the Torah [i.e., the Hebrew alphabet]” (Urbach 1975: 177).

3.1.1. The Torah as extended Name of God

The creation of the world through the agency of the letters is present in passages of the kabbalistic literature, especially in the Sefer Ye-sirah, in the Zohar, in the Sefer Ha-Temunah, the Book of the Image, and finally in the work of the 15th century mystic Moses Cordovero, The Verger of Pomegranates (Parades Rimmonim). According to all these Kabbalists, God’s use of the letters consists in various combinations of the letters of his name, from which all other letters are derived. For the Kabbalist, the Torah could be read as a chronicle, as a book of law, and above all as an extended Name of God (Scholem 1970: 36–45). Within this last level of reading, all letters were letters of the “great Name of God”. They also bore a mystical message by virtue of their numerical value and of their shapes. Nachmanides wrote: “We possess an authentic tradition showing that the entire Torah consists of the names of God and that the words we read can be divided in a very different way, so as to form (esoteric) names [...]”. The statement in the Aggadah to the effect that the Torah was originally written with black fire on white fire obviously confirms our opinion that the writing was continuous, without division into words, which made it possible to read it either as a sequence of (esoteric) names (‘al derekh ha-semor) or in the traditional way as history and commandments. Thus the Torah as given to Moses was divided into words in such a way as to be read as divine commandments. But at the same time he received the oral tradition, according to which it was to be read as a sequence of names” (Scholem 1970: 38). Similarly, Gikatila used the word “fabric” to illustrate the recurrence of the Name in the Torah: “The whole Torah is a fabric of appellatives, kinnuyim — the generic term for the epithets of God, such as compassionate, great, merciful, venerable — and these epithets in turn are woven from the various names of God (such as El, Elohim, Saday). But all these holy names are connected with the tetragrammaton YHWH and dependent upon it. Thus the entire Torah is ultimately woven from the tetragrammaton” (Sa’are Orah 2b; Scholem 1970: 42). In Scholem’s words the Torah is “a living texture, a textus in the literal sense of the word”.

3.1.2. The shape of the letters

The Torah is not only a blueprint into which God looked in order to create the world. It is also made of “letter-bodies”. This is explicitly stated in the midraś called “Letters of Rabbi Aktiva”. In his Explanation of the Letters, the early Kabbalist Rabbi Jacob ben Jacob Ha-Kohen writes: “Now look at the shape of alef and discover that it contains the shape of man with his head, his hands and his feet. The tip resembles yod, which corresponds to the ten parts of the human head, namely: the four temples of the head, the two ears, two eyes, and two nostrils [...]. It also corresponds to the ten fingers of the human hand. The middle stroke resembles vav, which corresponds to the six directions of man. For man is a microcosm [...]” (The Early Kabbal
Thus, the textual microcosm of the Hebrew letters corresponds to the physiological microcosm of man's body, *daleth* is "a man carrying a burden on his shoulders" (157). *Tet*, *peh* and *zayin* are "the head of the holy creatures of the Chariot" (159). The *Torah* is a *tavnit*, a blueprint for God's Creation, yet it also operates as a metatext and indicates guidelines for its own study. According to the following *midrash* the *bet* was chosen for a very specific reason as the beginning letter of the *Torah*, though being only the second letter in the alphabet: "Rabbi Yonah in the name of Rabbi Levi said: why was the world created with a *bet*? This is because the *bet* is closed on all sides and open in front. Accordingly, you have no right to study what is below and what is above, what is before, and what is after, but only from the day the world was created on-wards [...]" (Genesis Rabba: 1,10). A variant of this *midrash* in the Zohar presents the equation of *Torah* and Wisdom. In this instance, the shape of the letter *bet* is said to signify the possibility of esoteric knowledge: [The Torah] opened her mouth with wisdom" (Proverbs 31,26). The word 'wisdom' ("hokhmah"), says Rabbi Yossi, "signifies the bet of the word 'beresit' [...]. The *bet* is closed on one side and open on the other to throw light onto the higher worlds. This is why it was placed at the beginning of the Torah [...]." Not only is the Torah a blueprint, it is also the sustaining architecture that "textually" supports the actual world. Thus, in his twelfth century commentary on the Song of Songs Ben Shlomo of Gerona wrote: "The entire Torah was spoken by the mouth of the Mighty One and it Has not a letter nor jot that is superfluous, because it is altogether a building chiseled [the verb used here is "ha'ysav" - hewn] out of the Name of the Holy One blessed be He. Whoever omits a word, omits the Full Name or the entire world" (Scholem 1970: 39). Thus, a negligent scribe copying the Torah could, "literally", destroy the world.

3.2. Micrography

Another element which reveals the tension between iconic impulses at work within the global anti-iconicity of Judaism is micrography, the art of drawing pictures with letters. Thus, medieval Jewish manuscripts show abstract decorative motifs (sometimes representing Jewish liturgical objects) but also many scenes representing the bodies of animals, men, prophets, despite the strict prohibition against delineating the human body (cf. Farber 1977: 12–24). Avrin and Sirat 1979: 112–116 as well as Avrin and Sirat 1981). Micrography, therefore, is a way of legally "turning" the anti-iconic stance of the Torah: the artist (implicitly) claims that he is not drawing pictures but writing them (cf. Fig. 61.5). In other words, micrography pro-
claims the essential textuality of the world at the same time as it proclaims the essential iconicity of the Text (cf. Gandelman 1991: 62–63 and Doléve-Gandelman 1994).

4. The human body as a text: phylacteries, mezuzah, festivals

It is written in the works of Isaac Luria (cf. Vital 1980) that the phylacteries are called “brains”. Thus, the Jew who puts on the tefillin is in a state of unio mystica. Man himself is a letter or a combination of letters, just as God may be just a single letter. A disciple of Abulafia (1240—after 1291), the anonymous author of Sa’arei Shebek, wrote the following passage: “He is [the letter] Yod in this world, who has received the power of the All, and he comprises the All like the Yod in the Seferot […].” (Ms Jerusalem 81/48, fol. 56a).

Not only is the Jew textual in his very texture and body, he can also be defined as the human being who wraps himself up in textuality. The daily laying of the phylacteries (tefillin) upon his body and the marking of his home through a Torah scroll contained in a receptacle or mezuzah are two outstanding examples of this immersion in the text of the Torah. The phylacteries consist of two ritual objects, one of which is bound on the left arm, the other on the forehead. The head tefillah consists of a leather box made from the hide of a ritually clean animal and fastened by means of leather thongs. It is divided into four compartments, each of which contains copies of specific biblical passages. On one of the outer sides of the box is written the letter sin. At the back of the neck the looped thongs form the letter dalet. The thongs of the hand tefillah form the letter Yod (which, as in the passage above, is the head of God).

Together, these letters spell one of the names of God, “Ṣadai” (“Almighty”). The four texts contained in the box are Ex. 13,1–10 and 11–16 as well as Dt. 6,4–9 and Dt. 11,13–21. They bear witness to the fact that the Lord brought Israel forth from bondage in Egypt and gave His Law unto Moses on Mount Sinai, and they mention the obligation of obeying the Commandments. The phylacteries, originally worn all day, are now put on only during the morning worship. The Pentateuch designated the tefillin by the name “totafot” that some scholars see as related to the Arabic “ṭafa’” ’encircle’ (in this case, one is encircled with a text). Others have found the derivation of “totafot” from another Arabic root meaning ‘field of vision’. Thus, Dt. 11,8 may mean “[…] Ye shall lay up these words in your heart and your soul and bind them as a sign of remembrance on your hand, and let them be as a “field of vision” between your eyes.”

The Jew is also a text by virtue of the mezuzah, the small box containing fragments of Torah scrolls affixed on his threshold. Each person entering or leaving the house is supposed to kiss this fragmentary Torah upon entering or leaving. Thus, visiting the house of a Jew is the symbolic reading of a Torah scroll.

Finally, the Jew is textual by virtue of the Jewish festival meals at New Year (Rosh Hašanah) and Passover, in which he “eats words”. In the Sephardic tradition, the prescribed vegetables to be eaten during the New Year meal are selek ‘beet’, kratti ‘leek’, tamar ‘date’ and kra ‘pumpkin’. Two substitutes for leek and date may be used: garlic, i.e., tum (Arabic, cognate to Heb. yum), and pu ‘bean’. Selek seems to correspond to the blessing pronounced during the meal “that thy enemies should disappear!” (va-istaklu), while leek corresponds to va-yekarenu (“that thy enemies should be destroyed!”); tum corresponds to va-yetu (”that they should be annihilated!”) while beans correspond to va-yipelu (“that they should fall!”). Thus, food items become words (Haddad 1984: 62).

Similarly, during the Passover meal, the ritual horseradish root, maror (from the root “mr” ‘bitterness’) may designate Miṣrayim (Egypt, and the bitterness of the Jewish experience there). Analysis of the linguistic stratum of Jewish ritual allows to establish the existence of an equivalence between eating and reading. The ritual meal is the celebration of this substitution of functions between reading and eating. The ritual Jewish meal is an eating of signifiers (for examples of things taken as signs in the Christian tradition cf. Art. 46 §7. and Art. 49 §1.)

Another rite in which written words are, literally, “drunk” is that of sota, through which a woman suspected of adultery was examined in the Temple of Jerusalem. The Great Priest placed in a vase full of water a parchment on which he had written various Names of God. When the names were dissolved, the woman had to drink up the contents of the vase (Haddad 1984: 38). Prophecy, too, has to do with the ingestion and digestion of script. Ezekiel, the great
prophet, describes himself as ingurgitating the Holy Writ: "[…] He said unto me, Son of man, […] eat this roll, and go speak unto the house of Israel. So I opened my mouth and he caused me to eat the roll" (Ez. 3,1–2). Thus, prophecy is but a regurgitation of the divine script. In all these instances, Verb becomes Flesh in exactly the same proportion as Man becomes Text: that is, through an actual process of ingestion and digestion of the Text (cf. Art. 72).

5. Gematria: the Torah as symbolic mathematics

By virtue of their numerical value, the Hebrew letters lend themselves readily to symbolic manipulations. When a word is found to have the same numerical value as one situated in another passage of the Bible, equivalences are established. The origin of this gematria (from the Greek “geometry”) stems from the inherent textuality of the human body. Thus, an early kabbalistic text has: "And what is the reason for the raising of hands and blessing with a benediction? This is because there are ten fingers on the hands, a hint of the ten sefirot by which the sky and earth were sealed. And those ten correspond to the Ten Commandments, and within those ten all 613 commandments (migvot) are included. If you count the number of letters of the Ten Commandments you will find that there are 613 letters, comprising all 22 letters
of the alphabet, except for the letter tet, which is absent. What is the reason for that? To teach you that the tet represents beten (‘stomach, abdomen’) and not the sefirot” (The Early Kabbalah; cf. Dan 1986: 159–61).

With the late Kabbalists, gematria sometimes became extremely complex. Thus, the tetragrammaton YHWH can be seen as an addition of numerals: Y(10)+H(5)+V(6) +H(5) = 26. Yet it can also be seen as the product of a multiplication 5×6×5×10 = 1500. Here, on the other hand, 10 can be represented by 4, corresponding to the letter dalet (ד) by virtue of the decomposition: 10 = 1+2+3+4. Thus, the tetragram YHWH = 600. Finally, the tetragram can be divided into 4-letter groups: YHWH+YHW+YH +Y = 72. The simple addition is said to give the “face” (panim) of the divinity, while the other operations produce the “hind parts” (ahorim). – The value of gematria was questioned almost from the very beginning. Abraham Ibn Ezra (1089–1164), in his commentaries to Genesis (14,14) observed that gematria was without practical value because it left too much room to fantasy. Leo di Modena (1571–1648), Azulay (1724–1806) and Milasahagi (ca. 1780–1854) raised their voices against it. Nevertheless, it continues to be practised to this day (cf. the numerological practices in the Christian Middle Ages, Art. 51 § 8.).

6. The Torah as a speech act

In the words of Philo: “The Divine Name outstrips even time, for not even when he created the universe did time cooperate with him, since time itself was called into existence along with the world. For God’s creation was simultaneous with His speaking, allowing no interval between the two; or to put into play a truer view, his word was his deed” (Winston 1985: 107). Indeed, there is a Semitic root which expresses the idea of the simultaneity of Verb and Creation. Biblical Hebrew words and things, words and actions are designated by one and the same root “dbr”. Thus “dabar” may refer to both the words and the actions of God. On the subject of “dabar” the German theologian Bomann writes that “dabar bildet eine Einheit von Wort und Tat” (“dabar constitutes a unity of word and action”; Bomann 1968: 52). Thus, “dbr” seems to be a permanent shifter between two antithetical possibilities: words/things, speech/actions. For the mystics this notion can be extended to the whole Torah, which, after all, is “God’s speech”. Mysticism, for them, means that the world is in a permanent state of re-creation through the reading of the Verb. Studying the Torah is performative action: theurgy. The human, and especially the kabbalistic, counterpart to the divine dbr is theurgy, the “constraining of God” through prayer and study. Studying the Torah is seen as a performative act and the neglect of the study of the Torah may cause a “paucity” or even deploration in God (Idel 1988: 160). The acceptance of the Torah as their Holy Book by the Israelites is seen by the Talmud as a prerequisite for the existence of the Universe: “The Holy One, Blessed be-He, made a condition with the Creation saying: ‘If Israel receive my Torah, good; if not, I shall return you to chaos’” (Idel 1988: 162). Thus the Torah is the textual support of the Universe, and not only the blueprint for its creation. In this context, the scribes, students and sages (sadikim) are the pillars of the world. Ceasing to study the Text may mean the end of the Universe. Thus studying the Torah is construed by the Kabbalists as a theurgical act: an action through which life is given to God. Israel “nourishes” (mefarnes) the Divinity (Idel 1988: 161). A late Kabbalist, Azulay, actually wrote: “When a man utters words of the Torah, he never ceases to create spiritual potencies and new lights which issue forth like medicines from ever new combinations of the [textual] elements and consonants [...]” (Scholom 1970: 76). Studying the Torah, however, is not done haphazardly but follows specific exegetical methods.

7. Levels of exegesis: the Christian connection

The two main layers, halakhah (description of behavior according to the Law) and aggadah (speculation with a view to elucidation of the reader) are at the core of any reading of the Bible. But, in the course of time, a four-layered structure of interpretation came to be superimposed on the Holy text. In his Apologia written in 1487, Pico della Mirandola already drew attention to the parallelism between the Christian and the Jewish method: “Just as with us there is a fourfold method of Biblical exegesis, the literal, the mystical or allegorical, the tropic and the anagogic, so
also among the Hebrews. They call the literal meaning pesat, the allegorical midras, the tropic sekhel, and the analogic and most sublime of all, kabbalah” (Pico della Mirandola 1557: 178–19). The earliest reference to the four levels is to be found in the Midras Ha-Ne’elam commentary on the Book of Ruth by Moses de Leon. “The words of the Torah are likened to a nut. How is this to be understood? […] Each word of the Torah contains outward form (ma’ asah), midras, aggadah, and mystery (sod), each of which has a meaning deeper than the preceding (Zohar Hadas, Jerusalem 1953: 83a). The traditional division of Jewish exegesis does, indeed, involve four layers, pesat, remez, deras, sod, (remez corresponds to “allegory” and sod ‘secret’ corresponds to “kabbalah” in Pico’s terminology). The initial letters form the word p.r.d.s., vocalized as Pardes, that is, “Paradise”. Thus a famous midras speaks of the “Four Sages who entered Paradise”. This statement must be understood as an exegetical or textual one: “One saw and died, the second saw and lost his reason, the third laid waste the young plants (that is became an apostate and seduced the young). Only Rabbi Akiba entered in peace and came out in peace” (Hagigah 14b in Tosefta, ed. Zuckermandel, p. 234; cf. Sholem 1946: 52). Concerning the origin of the method, Sholem maintains that the fourfold semantism of the Torah bears a marked similarity to the conceptions of certain Christian authors such as Bede (cf. Art. 33 § 34. as well as Art. 55 § 1.3. and § 2.4. and Art. 58 § 3). Bacher (1850–1913), then later Scholem, thought that the Kabbalists were influenced by Christian hermeneutics.

8. Pre-deconstructionist aspects of Judaism

8.1. Essential pluralism

According to the 16th century Kabbalistic Isaac Luria, “every word of the Torah has six hundred thousand ‘faces’ (panim), six hundred entrances: one for each of the children of Israel who stood at the foot of Mount Sinai. And each face is turned toward only one of them; he alone can see it and decipher it. Each man has its own unique access to Revelation” (Sholem 1970: 13). Sholem saw a general connection between the Kabbala and the work of Kafka. Indeed the Luria text seems to prefigure the Kafka story entitled “Before the Law”. Even more extreme than the six-hundred-thousand “faces”, an exegetical principle long practised by the Sages, proclaims that “everything and its opposite is in the Torah” (“hafokh-ba ve-kulah-ba”). This antithetical pluralism seems to be the basis for the indefinite postponement of meaning central in Derrida’s thought (cf. Art. 122).

8.2. The paradoxical “presence of absence”

Rabbi Isaac the Blind (end of the 12th and beginning of the 13th century) wrote: “In God’s right hand were engraved all the engravings (innermost forms) that were destined some day to rise from potency to act. […] this formation is called the concentrated, not yet unfolded Torah […]. Along with all the other engravings (principally) two engravings were made of it. The one has the form of the written Torah, the other the form of the oral Torah. The form of the written Torah is that of the color of white fire, and the form of the oral Torah has colored forms as of black fire. And all these engravings and the not yet unfolded Torah existed potentially, perceptible neither to a spiritual nor to a sensory eye, until the Will [of God] inspired the idea of activating them […]. Thus at the beginning of all acts there was pre-existentially the not yet unfolded Torah [torah kelalah] which is in God’s right hand with all the primordial forms […] and in one spiritual act emanated the not yet unfolded Torah in order to give permanence to the foundations of the world” (Sholem 1970: 48–49). Isaac the Blind explains that the Torah burned permanently before God as a group of fiery black letters written over a white fire: the white fire is the written Torah, in which the forms of the letters is not yet explicit; the form of the letters was conferred by the black fire which is the oral Torah. This black fire is like the ink on the parchment of the scroll: “[…] the written Torah can take on corporeal form only through the power of the oral Torah, that is to say, without the oral Torah, it cannot be truly understood” (Sholem 1970: 49). The mystical white between the letters is the written Torah, but not the black of the letters inscribed in ink (an esoteric white form and an exoteric black form). The two spheres overlap and there is no written Torah (the esoteric white form) that is free from the “oral” element (the exoteric black form). The blank space, the essential absence, makes manifest the no less essential presence of the Sekhinah “exiled in textuality”. The Kabbalists saw the
centrality of a paradox, namely, that it is precisely the absence of the chief signified, God, that permits meaning to arise. It is the unsaid between the lines of the text which determines the explicitly stated as meaning. Blank space, silence, is as important as the actual letters and conditions them. The Torah also "deconstructs itself" by virtue of its refusal to be a chronologically linear "narrative" structure. The well-known exegetic principle that the Torah is a-chronological ("there is no 'before' or 'after' in the Torah"); "en mukdam u-me'edah ba-torah") points in this direction. Similarly, the anonymous author of Sa'arei Ṣedeḳ taught his disciple: "My son, it is not the intention that you should come to a stop with some finite form, be it of the highest order" (Izel 1988: 202). Doubtlessly, the "deferring of meaning" advocated by Derrida and his school is the final product of a long tradition begun with the Kabbalah. In the modern period, pre-deconstructionist thought came to the fore through the exponents of this doctrine, especially with Gershon Scholem. Yet, before him, his friend Franz Rosenzweig (1886–1929) may also be termed a pre-deconstructionist thinker in his rejection of the Bible as "meaningful" narrative. Rosenzweig had actually written to Scholem that "The only immediate content of Revelation is [...] revelation itself; with "va-yered" ("He came down"; Ex. 19,20) it is essentially complete; with "va-yedaber" ("He spoke"); Ex. 20,1) interpretation sets in, and continues even more emphatically with "anokhi" (the divine "I" at the beginning of the Ten Commandments) (Rosenzweig 1935: 535 and 1955: 118). For Rosenzweig, the Bible is essentially the statement "it was revealed", and all interpretation must be "postponed" until the End of Days. Not only his letters to Scholem but also his main work, Stern der Erlösung ('Star of Redemption' 1930), reflect his fundamental rejection of interpretation.

9. Kabbalistic linguistics

In a series of brilliant works, and more especially in his article "The Name of God and the linguistic theories of the Kabbalah", Scholem described the Kabbalah as fundamentally linguistic mysticism. What the Kabbalists were after, through exegesis and combinatorics, was the contact with the unmediated Word, the ineffable tetragrammaton from which everything stems. "The secret world of the godhead is a world of language, a world of divine names that unfold according to a law of their own [...]" (Scholem 1970: 36). Thus, the Kabbalah proclaimed (1) the principle of God's name; (2) the principle of the Torah as an organism; (3) the principle of the infinite meaning of the divine word (Scholem 1973: 37). And Scholem added, "The world of language is [...] actually the 'spiritual' world" (Scholem 1987: 278). Scholem was the established of continuity: his investigations showed there was no gap between medieval Kabbalah and the Talmudic Judaism of the first centuries. Yet, he was also the explorer of discontinuity. In the second sphere of his activity, as a historian of the sources of the Messianic currents in modern Judaism, Scholem drew attention to the importance of contradictions and dialectical reversal in mysticism: for the seventeenth century adepts of the "millenarian" Sabbatay Zevi (1626–1676), "reality became dialectically unreal" so that they came to speak of the "holiness of sin". The search for meaning in the "historical" world was confronted by no less an absolute non-intelligibility when the Law was placed within a historical context. Messianism meant a dialectic reversal of signs of the type "redemption through sin", the Sabbatian concept. Another reversal awaited the Jews: what Zionism — largely a successor of Sabbatianism — eventually offered was "redemption through history".

10. Selected references


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