

MYSTICISM

in 20th Century Hebrew Literature

Israel: Society, Culture and History

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MYSTICISM

in 20th Century Hebrew Literature

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PREFACE

My interest in Jewish mysticism began in 1957-1960, when I was doing my B.A. at the Hebrew University. I had the privilege to learn from Gershom Scholem, Rivka Schatz-Uffenheimer, Yeshaiahu Tishbi, Shlomo Pines and Yosef Dan. I came back to this field when I was writing a book on Zelda's poetry.¹ The study of Zelda's poems led me to her Hassidic background, including the *Tania* and the writings of her uncle, Rabbi Avraham Khen.² While doing research on the Russian background of modern Hebrew literature, I discovered the important role of modern Russian mysticism in modern Jewish culture and early Zionism. I learned about the influence of Vladimir Soloviev and his followers on Jewish writers who were acquainted with Russian literature and thought. I realized the affinity of early 20th century Jewish literature with the Russian understanding of Revolution as an apocalyptic event.

During 1995-2005 I was a research fellow at the Jerusalem Hartman Institute. The cooperation with my colleagues, and especially with Moshe Idel, encouraged my interest in modern mysticism. A few months at the Center for Judaic Studies in Philadelphia in 2003 helped me to begin this project, which took four years to finish.

In writing this book I hoped to show that *traditional Jewish mysticism, whose literary character has only recently been uncovered, was continued in the 20th century by Hebrew writers and poets, many of whom were non-observant Jews*. The idea is not completely innovative. Various scholars have already found mystical elements in the writings of Bialik, Agnon, Alterman, and many other authors of 20th century Hebrew literature. I tried to examine this phenomenon from a panoramic point of view which encircles 20th century Hebrew literature, focusing on poetry.

1 Bar-Yosef, *Al shirat Zelda*.

2 Avraham Khen, *Bemalkhut ha-yahadut*.

It was clear to me from the very beginning that the map which I shall draw is not going to be complete, for it will be influenced by my preferences and my limitations of knowledge. Only after I realized enormous amount of the materials did I understand that I would have to pay a high price: I could not go deeply into any poets work — and there are many who deserve such thorough analysis. I have brought fragmentary examples from poems and books rich with mystical expression, avoiding close reading. Such examples do not give a fair idea of the poems' beauty. I could not follow the development of mystical ideas and style in the literary work of specific poets (the only exclusion is Pinhas Sadeh, whose attitude to death as mystical experience I tried to analyze diachronically in the fourth chapter). I have not even mentioned the names of poets who publish mystical poetry, but did not supply me with clear examples for my arguments. I avoided poets whose work did not seem to me to be a clear illustration of the phenomena I wanted to examine. I hope that an anthology of mystical Hebrew poems will appear in the future, and more researches will correct the injustices I have made.

It is my pleasant duty to thank The Hartman Institute for the wonderful feeling of a spiritual home it gave me, and to the Institute for Judaic Studies in Philadelphia, with its wonderful library service. I also thank Moshe Idel, Yosef Dan, Rachel Elior, Zvi Mark, Yehuda Liebes, Yoni Garb, Melila Helner, Avraham Elquayam, Haviva Pedaya and Menahem Lorberbaum, who have read the Hebrew manuscript, or parts of it, and added useful comments. I would also like to thank the dedicated and patient librarians of the Hebrew National Library and the librarians of the Scholem Collection Section there.

CHAPTER ONE

Is Mysticism in Modern Hebrew Literature Possible?

Secular Jewish Mysticism?

This book deals with Hebrew literary texts which describe and express mystical experiences and insights. It does not deal with mysticism as a social phenomenon, either esoteric or populist, nor does it focus on practices, rites, cults, or any other cultural collective activities. It does not deal with the writers' biographies — biographical information about the writer's experiences, way of life and cultural context will serve here only as an aid for the interpretation of the literary text.

This book is intended to show that many 20th century Hebrew literary works describe and express mystical experiences, and therefore these works are a continuation of the traditional Jewish mysticism and an integral part of Jewish mystical literature. Is it possible to speak seriously of mysticism in the Jewish context without a religious frame of life?

Gershom Scholem, the scholar who founded the basis for the academic research of Jewish mysticism, wrote that "there is no mysticism for itself, there is only mysticism of a specific religious system — Christian, Moslem, Jewish etc. [...] only in our time has the idea of abstract mystical religion laid down roots [...] but history proves that the great mystics were connected to the great religions and their beliefs."³ Yosef Ben-Shlomo, the scholar of Jewish philosophy and mysticism, wrote: "The statement 'every mysticism is based on religion' can serve as a criterion to the understanding of mystical phenomenon. This is its difference from other fields of the human spirit. In this sense Proust and Rimbeau were not mystics."⁴ In contrast to this stance, which denies the possibility of a mysticism which is outside the context of a specific religion, there are scholars who see mysticism as a universal human experience. According

3 Scholem, *Kabbalah*, p. 6

4 Ben-Shlomo, "Mysticism and Religion," p. 134.

to this view, which I accept, "Mysticism might be connected with religion but this is not a necessary condition."⁵

The root of disagreement about the religious character of "mysticism" is the different understanding of this term. In fact, the differences of opinion among scholars of mysticism about the essence of "mysticism" in general, and "Jewish mysticism" in particular, are so great that they might shatter any argument about mysticism at all. It seems that whoever wishes to deal seriously with this topic should first of all make clear what he/she means by "mysticism." Here follows my definition of mystical experience, which is far from being original:

Mystical experience, when in its climax, is a strong, ecstatic feeling of joyful exaltation. It is a paradoxical feeling of personal perfection together with self-annihilation. It is an intimate contact with a sacred, mysterious divine being, abundant with and bestowing goodness and beauty. Mystical experience involves disconnection from physical and emotional needs, from distresses, bereavement and loss. It is a feeling of freedom from egoistical impulses and greediness. This freedom from physical and material needs enables a feeling of power, independence and exaltation. Together with the feeling of self-annihilation it transforms negative impulses into a consciousness of value, greatness and honor. These feelings are based on a belief in the existence of a spiritual dimension to the world, and in the astonishing, paradoxical possibility of breaking the border between the human and the divine worlds. The extreme, non-realistic character of this experience makes it difficult to communicate. It is therefore often transmitted by literary means, including esoteric language, ecstatic rhetoric and symbols.

In contrast to the scholars whose approach emphasizes the "contingent," or culturally specific elements of mysticism,⁶ I agree with scholars of mysticism who regard it as a basic human need, which is not conditioned by an established religion or a specific culture. Therefore mystical experiences can be achieved by secular human beings. How surprisingly similar are mystical experiences and their symbolical images, when expressed by people who belong to different religions and cultures! "All mystics speak the same language," stated Evelyn

5 Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, p. 39.

6 The term "contingent" is used by Dan, *On Sacredness*, pp. 89-90.

Underhill.⁷ “The uniformity [of mystical texts which belong to different religions] is clearer in mysticism than in [orthodox] religion; they are sometimes word-by-word formulations,” writes Ben-Shlomo.⁸ This relative uniformity can be traced in modern literature, written by non-observant Jews.

There is no doubt that culture moulds the mystical experience and its stylistic expression, in the same way as it moulds other emotional experiences. Culture can determine the degree of consciousness to mysticism and the degree of its centrality. Nowadays, however, in a culture which emphasizes the particularity of cultural contexts, ethnic identity and gender differences, it is interesting to examine the mystical experience as a basis for the spiritual unity of mankind.

Is it possible for a non-religious person to have an authentic mystical experience? The indivisibility of mysticism from religion was created in 17th century departments of theology in European universities, where academic research of mysticism in terms of Christian theology began.⁹ In this Christian context, mysticism was considered to be the highest expression of religious life.¹⁰ Today the academic research of mysticism has spread into history, anthropology, psychology, art and literature, but it is still considered a traditional part of departments of theology. In these departments, mysticism is studied by experts who are supplied with theological knowledge, theoretical background and research methodology.¹¹ This is the reason why mystical texts were more often examined as expressions of theological views than as literary texts expressing emotions.

The approach to mysticism as an emotional experience was initiated by 19th century German philosophy (especially in the writings of Friedrich Schelling and Friedrich Schleiermacher), and was continued by neo-Romantic litera-

7 Underhill, *Mysticism*, p. 80.

8 Ben-Shlomo, “Mysticism and Religion,” p. 156.

9 De Certeau, “Mysticism,” p. 17.

10 On the difference between the Jewish and the Christian meanings of “Sacredness,” See Dan, *On Sacredness*, pp. 11-30.

11 McGinn, *The Foundation of Mysticism*, pp. 262-343. McGinn divides modern research of mysticism into theological, philosophical and comparative-psychological, not reserving a separate place for literature and art. The researches he cites examine mysticism as a religious phenomenon. See also De Certeau, “Mysticism,” pp. 14-16.

ture and thought at the turn of the 20th century.¹² In the 20th century, Martin Heidegger and Ludwig Wittgenstein saw mysticism as a primary, universal human category of knowledge. The understanding of mysticism as a universal mental and spiritual activity was developed in the 20th century by Albert Schweitzer, Henri Bergson, William James, Jaques Maritain, Evelyn Underhill and many others.¹³ William James, the pioneer of “pluralistic mysticism” argued that the concept “God” does not necessarily have a supernatural meaning.¹⁴ Rudolf Otto wrote that the mystic has a God which is different from the orthodox one.¹⁵ Nietzsche went to the furthest paradox, saying: “I am a mystic and I believe in nothing.”¹⁶

The comparative research of mysticism turned first to the religions of the Far East, in spite of the fact that they do not include God. In the 20th century, the anthropological scope of this research widened, and now it includes even Eskimoan mysticism.¹⁷ Following this expansion the concept “Mysticism” was widened. The tension between mysticism and the established religion, even in Christianity, became clearer. The purely theological (in fact, theosophical) approach to mysticism is now challenged by many scholars, who turn to other points of view. The modern concept of Jewish mysticism as a spiritual experience of unity whose object is “a sacred being,” not necessarily “God” was accepted by Martin Buber and by other Jewish scholars working in the first half of the 20th century.¹⁸

Although the focus of mystical experience is not the revelation of theological truth but the emotional experience, it is still an experience of inner enlight-

12 On Schelling and Kabbalah see Shulte, “Zimzum bei Schelling”; Idel, *New Perspectives*, p. 275. See also Hurvitz, “On Kabbalah and Mythos.” On the interest in mysticism in Germany at turn of the 20 century see Mendes-Flohr, “Orientalism.” On mysticism in Russia during the Silver Age see Rosenbach, *Contemporary Mysticism*.

13 McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, pp. 266-326.

14 James, *The Religious Experience*, pp. 403-408.

15 Otto, *Mysticism East and West*, p. 258. According to Otto the God of the mystic is immanent, while the God of the orthodox is transcendental.

16 Cited by De Certeau, “Mysticism,” p. 22.

17 Hollenback, *Mysticism*, pp. 305-446; Katz, *Mysticism and Religious Traditions*.

18 Ross, *Beloved and Hated Tradition*, pp. 199-211.

enment, endowing one with a feeling of insight into reality. It enables one to understand reality and to accept it as full of beauty and wisdom. This experience not only cancels inner conflicts, not only fills one with inner powers and joy, but is also an experience of understanding things that were not understood before. It is very difficult to formulate this feeling of insight and understanding as a theological argument, since it is not a knowledge or truth in the scientific or philosophical sense. Religious people can take this feeling as a confirmation of their faith. For secular people it can be a drive to moral impulses or to a change of their world view. It is natural then to find in traditional mystical texts expressions of true revelations out of irrational enlightenment, as well as formulations of the mystical experience in philosophical or even semi-scientific ways, such as a schematic, scientifically systematic descriptions of the divine world or the processes of its communication with the human world. In Jewish classical kabalistic texts, such formulations are frequent and central. However, they do not condition the existence of a mystical experience; they are a reflection of the cultural background, in which philosophical-scientific style was the accepted way to express such experiences.

The argument that there are mystical elements in 20th century Hebrew literature raises one more basic question: can Jews who do not observe the religious laws create Jewish mysticism?

The understanding of mysticism as a product of a specific culture, and of culture as a central factor in the formulation and interpretation of religious beliefs and experiences,¹⁹ can serve as a basis to the argument that people who live in a secular culture can have mystical experiences, and these experiences are formulated and interpreted according to the conventions of this specific culture.

Haviva Pedaia, the mystical poet and academic scholar of mysticism, when asked “Can a *lo-dati* [secular] person achieve a mystical experience?” said: “If by *lo-dati* you mean that he does not observe the *mitzvot* [the Jewish religious laws] — then yes, no doubt.”²⁰ In 1984 the poet Yona Wollach, who lived a completely secular, bohemian life in Tel-Aviv, told the poet and editor Helit Yeshurun:

19 Jonas, *Myth and Mysticism*, esp. p. 328; Smart, “Interpretation,” esp. p. 16.

20 Pedaia, “Interview,” p. 185.

I met God, and my life went upside down [...] a light began, at that period light was going around in my head [...] and a man went down from heaven, with all the constellations, and I saw the creation of the world [...] it made me seclude myself and reflect for many years [...] I used to hear Him since I was a small kid. I used to awfully love Him [...] I saw a cloud of mist into which I was swallowed, and then I came home.²¹

Gershom Scholem in his book, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (1941), wrote that Hassidism was the last chapter in the history of Jewish mysticism, and that “My contemporaries can only tell the story [of Jewish mysticism], not share the experience.”²² In his essay “Reflections on the Possibility of Jewish Mysticism Today” Scholem wrote that “during the last generations there were no awakenings of individuals which produced new forms of mystical theologies or movements which were meaningful in public life.”²³ The reason for that, according to Scholem, is that Jewish mysticism is not possible without a belief in God and the sacredness of the Torah, without which the basis of Jewish mysticism completely collapses.²⁴

The stipulation of mysticism as based on religious belief and life is still accepted by many scholars today, and in fact it seems necessary when dealing with Jewish mysticism. “Secular Jewish mysticism” is a combination of words which sounds paradoxical to observant Jews and to those who identify Judaism with observance. They can justly ask: if one does not believe in God, with what is he united during his *Unio Mystica*?

I would like to answer this question — as Jews often do — with another question: which God are you speaking of? My understanding is that religious people use the word “God” in many different meanings, and even the same religious person uses it during his life in different meanings. One of these meanings can be: the origin of the need to elevate oneself above the usual everyday life and distance oneself from the pursuit of material and physical pleasures and from egoistical impulses. This feeling of deep impulse to make

21 Wollach, “Interview,” p. 115.

22 Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 350. See also Idel, *New Perspectives*, p. 283.

23 Scholem, *Explications and Implications*, vol. 1, p. 71.

24 Ibid., p. 80.

life more pure, spiritual and moral — sometimes without knowing how to do it — is characteristic of mystical life in many cultures, even without a belief in a certain God.

Hollenback stated that the mystic reveals a truth, which is considered to be absolute in his society or culture.²⁵ However, if this truth is already accepted anyhow, what does the mystic reveal? It seems that in a religious culture the role of mystical experience is not the revelation of theological truth, but the emotional power of the experience and the power it gives to the believers.²⁶ In a modern secular society, however, where mysticism is looked at with suspicion and even hostility, the mere information about a mystical experience and the happiness it gives can be an astonishing revelation of a new truth. In a modern secular culture, more than in a traditional religious one, the mystical experience is a revelation of a surprising truth, which is to be found beyond the conventional cultural horizons.

Scholem concluded his *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* with reflections on the possibility that “the story [of Jewish mysticism] has not yet been finished [...]its treasure of secret life can still break out tomorrow in you or in me.”²⁷ In his aforementioned essay, “Reflections on the Possibility of Jewish Mysticism Today,” he went further and asked: “Who knows where are the borders of sacredness? [...]This sacredness might appear in the innermost center of this [Zionist] secular life. Maybe new forms of mysticism are unrecognized in terms of the [Jewish] tradition. Maybe this [new] mysticism will not fit in the conservative tradition of the [Jewish] mystics, for it will have a secular meaning.”²⁸ These reflections shake Scholem’s previous argument, according to which Jewish mysticism is not possible without traditional Jewish religion. They accentuate the innovative, law-breaking character of mysticism in general, and Jewish mysticism in particular. Jewish mystics always tended to diminish the value of traditional practice of the *mitzvot*, demanding to practice them according to an innovative interpretation, completely different from the

25 Hollenback, *Mysticism*, p. 40.

26 Garb, *Power in Jewish Mysticism*.

27 Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 350.

28 Scholem, *Explications and Implications*, p. 82.

orthodox one. Kabbalah and Hassidism, which today are considered inseparable parts of traditional Judaism, in the 19th century were considered by both orthodox Jews and maskilim to be ex-Jewish phenomena. True, there were periods — especially the Middle Ages — when mystics such as RAMBAN, RASHBA, Bahyai Ibn Paquda and Avraham son of RAMBAM were central figures in Jewish culture. In other periods, Jewish mysticism was accused of alien influences. It is not by chance that the Jewish mystical movements, Sabbateanism and Frankism, led Jews out of Judaism, to Islam and to Christianity. Even in the Middle Ages mystical techniques of observing religious laws were not the only Jewish mystical means to redemption. Personal perfection and the cancellation of physical influence on the spirit, even without observing the *mitzvot*, were also considered as redemptive mystical activities.²⁹

Scholars of Jewish mysticism emphasize the fact that in spite of new interpretations and practices of the religious laws, Jewish mysticism has never disconnected itself from the fulfillment of the *mitzvot* and the study of the Torah.³⁰ In fact, Jewish mystics often present themselves as pupils of ancient teachers, but at the same time they claim to achieve “a revelation of Eliahu,” namely to reveal something completely new.³¹ “The Zohar is a total renaissance of Jewish culture” wrote Liebes.³² All Jewish traditional mystical movements began with a striving for spiritual renovation of Judaism, and therefore at their beginnings they had to withdraw from their contemporaneous dominant orthodoxy.³³

Refutations of the authenticity of mysticism in texts written by secular Jews are sometimes based on the argument that their use of words such as “God,” “redemption” and “sacredness” is “hollow” or “empty,” because it is just metaphorical. This argument raises the question: What is the meaning of religious terms and narratives for an observant Jew? Does he use them throughout his life in a literal sense? It is clear that even the most orthodox Jew does not un-

29 Idel, “Patterns of Redeeming Activity,” pp. 253-279.

30 Idel, *New Perspectives*, pp. 10-13; Dan, *On Sacredness*, p. 154.

31 Dan, “Prayer As Text,” p. 34.

32 Liebes, “New Directions,” p. 160. See also idem, *Hazohar ke-renaissance*.

33 Elior, “Jewish Mysticism and Freedom.”

derstand the scriptures literally, for the midrash itself interprets the Torah as a non-literal text, and the mystical midrash does so in a much more daring way. The border between a literal and metaphorical understanding of God is located in different places in the consciousnesses of religious people, and even in the consciousness of the same person at different ages.³⁴ Contemporaneous scholars of mysticism argued that the traditional mystical text does not enable us to know what was the real mystical experience which it reflected, because we have nothing but the text, which documents the experience indirectly, by metaphors and symbols.³⁵ This fact does not shatter the authenticity of traditional mystical experience.

However, if a mystical experience is authentic and serious, even when it is expressed by metaphors and symbols, which hide the real experience, why are the same metaphors and symbols “hollow” if written by a secular person? Information about the observance of the *mitzvot* by the writer might be relevant for a full understanding of these texts, but this is not a condition or a criterion for treating it as part of the Jewish mystical tradition. The criterion is the experience which the text itself communicates to the reader.

The tension between tradition and a daring new creation lies in the center of every mystical literature. It is possible to argue that today, poetical documentation of mystical experiences is less daring than it used to be in the stiff frames of Orthodox Jewish culture, but let us not forget that the secular system of literary reception, even if it considers itself liberal, has its own conventions and norms, which causes it to reject — sometimes with surprising fanaticism — elements which are alien to it. In this sense, during the 20th century secular mystical literature is a special genre of subversive, “peripheral” writing (in post-modernist terms). It was created by a very small group of writers and poets, whose lives were uncharacteristic of the average Israeli intellectual. Like mysticism in Orthodox society, this literature was also a proposal of a purer, more spiritual life, and it became a reservoir of cultural dynamics, whose power cannot yet be measured.

34 On the problem of distinction between literal and symbolic uses of religious terms see Bevan, *Symbolism*, pp. 252-274.

35 Idel, “Universalization and Integration,” p. 27; Dan, *Apocalypse*, p. 7; idem, *On Sacredness*, p. 42.

Mysticism and Literature

What is a mystical text? Like any literary text the mystical text transmits emotions and insights in a style which attracts the reader to the writer's personal experience and world view.³⁶ "Mystics are generally individuals who search for a deep communion with God in a personal, intensive, unique way," wrote Yosef Dan.³⁷ Personal, intensive and unique — these are also the desirable qualities of the literary text, and in fact, despite the difficulty, often mentioned in definitions of "mysticism," of expressing mystical experiences in words, many mystics wrote texts which witness a wonderful mastery of the art of literature. These texts shared and will continue to share the writer's experiences and his world view with many readers, and they are part of the history of culture and a reservoir of influence on culture in the future.

As with any literary text, the understanding of the mystical text depends on interpretation. This interpretation depends on the cultural and literary background of the reader, which does not, however, mean that it is completely subjective. Even the identification of the text's mystical character depends on the reader's cultural and literary background.

Theories which deny literary works truth value, and see them as an aesthetic and linguistic products only, can lead us to the conclusion that there is a principal difference between mysticism and literature, because the mystical text expresses an absolute truth, while literature, and especially poetry, is fiction; truth is beyond its scope.³⁸ This view of literature was popular during the 1960s-1970s, when formalistic and structuralistic approaches to literature, focusing on the formal and aesthetic aspects of the literary text and rejecting the importance of its contents, were imported from the West from Eastern Europe, where these approaches were in opposition to the oppressive demand to write "realistic" literature.

36 Mina, "The Textuality," pp. 37-39, 44-45.

37 Dan, "Prayer as Text," p. 34.

38 Dan, *On Sacredness*, pp. 31-58.

Nowadays literary scholars often deal with the political role of the literary text and with its reflection of reality. From this point of departure it is possible to continue and treat mystical literature — both classical and modern — as multi-level linguistic products, designed to share experiences, visions and insights of truth with a reader. This truth is the astonishing moment of revelation, of contact with sacredness, indirectly transmitted by symbolical images and events, esoteric language and inter-textual allusions. Mystical texts, like certain poems, were designed for only a small group of elitist “enlightened” readers, who can decipher a difficult, multi-dimensional linguistic code.

What makes a traditional mystical text into a work of literature? Not only the reader’s subjective impression of the beauty and emotional power of the text, but also the need for literary interpretation in order to fully understand it. This is why style is a necessary key to the distinction between a text which gives information *about* mystical experiences or explains the ways to achieve such experiences, on the one hand, and a text which describes mystical experiences by using indirect language, replete with images and rhetorical devices on the other. Such a text transmits great emotions and needs interpretation of its implicit contents, in words that cannot reconstruct the impression and the effects of the text itself.

Another basis for the argument that a mystical text is completely different from any other literary text is that mystical texts have a divine authority which literature cannot have.³⁹ History of culture shows that the measure of authority culture allows to either literature or mysticism is not constant: there were secular cultures in which literature had an enormous authority and was considered as the main representative of common ideals, while there were religious cultures in which mysticism had no legitimate authority.

Not every poem is mystical. Poetry is not mystical in its essence, and the poet’s moment of inspiration is not necessarily a mystical experience.⁴⁰ Some

39 Idel, “Universalization and Integration,” p. 17.

40 For the understanding of poetic inspiration as a mystical experience, see Gatenby, *The Cloud-men*, pp. 9-11; Maritain, *Creative Intuition*, pp. 172-173; Elshtein, “Sensitive and trans-Sensitive,” pp. 13-30. Elshtein argues that the mystic “descends” while the poet “ascends” in their way between the material and the transcendental.

scholars argue that it is possible to scientifically identify mystical poetry by its hypnotic influence on the reader.⁴¹ Some scholars of mysticism identify mystical style by the use of oxymora and paradoxes, expressing the transrational character of the transcendent reality; by the use of synaesthesia, describing supersensory experiences; by the use of esoteric words, and strange syntax and rhetoric, which creates a magic, hypnotic impression; by the use of symbols, especially from the mystical tradition (such as light and darkness, fire, rainbow colors, lily or rose, bird, pilgrim, erotic feelings and activity, and in Jewish mysticism, also temple, gates, king and throne). To this we should add the inter-textual aspect, which refers to the mystical traditional texts and thus joins their world. It is clear that a secular poet can use all these devices as well, in a poem which does not necessarily express a mystical experience, for example one which parodies a mystical text.

Like any interpretation of literary text, the identification and classification of a text as belonging to the mystical category should be based neither on style only nor on contents and theme alone. The categorization of a text as mystical should be decided on the basis of a *cluster* of its thematic, emotional, conceptual and stylistic qualities. Their joined presence in the text produces its mystical character, which links it to the tradition of mystical literature.

A literary text is mystical if it expresses a mystical experience and wishes to share it with the reader. This does not include texts which describe mystical life from a critical or an “objective” point of view. It also excludes poems which describe and explain the writer’s relationship with God, or deal with a theological theme without trying to share a powerful emotional experience with the reader. True, the borders are not always clear. In the same story or novel one can find both a voice which describes mystical life and behavior from an external, documental or even satirical point of view, and an “internal” voice which describes and expresses the mystical experiences of his characters. In modern literary texts an ambivalent attitude to mysticism can be found. The writer can open various possible attitudes to mysticism (each incorporated by a different character) and leave the reader to choose between them. In fact,

41 Zur, *Hypnotic Poetry*, pp. 32-52. Zur alternatively writes about “metaphysical” and “mystical” poetry. See also Elshtein, pp. 13-26.

the variety and complexity of attitudes toward mysticism is one of the major differences between modern and traditional mystical literature.

We should bear in mind that art and literature indirectly reflect theoretical views of reality, influenced by contemporaneous scientific, philosophical and psychological theories. High intellectual energies are active in the moments of mystical creativity, the same as in the moments of literary inspiration. Poets, like mystics, do not only report on experiences, they also discover laws which do not have a ready linguistic formulation, so they create a special language which expresses indirectly what cannot be expressed in the usual, known language.⁴² The literary mystical work describes not only experiences, but also new mystical world views.

Such texts describe the exciting path which leads to unity with God; the relations between God and the terrestrial, human world; the ways God is reflected in the terrestrial world; personal or collective redemption and the way which leads to it; the difficulty of expressing in words the meeting with the transcendent reality — theosophical themes which engage both traditional and modern mysticism. Symbolical images, together with other indirect linguistic devices, are used in order to describe powerful experiences of exaltation, disembodiment, and absorption in a divine being or searching the way to it. The poetic devices can be both traditional and idiosyncratic.

As mentioned above, the classification of a poem as “mystical” and its interpretation depends upon the reader’s acquaintance with the variety of mystical literary traditions and conventions: namely, upon his cultural background and personal horizons.

Writers and artists enthusiastically expressed the Western rise of interest in mysticism, especially in the periods of 19th century Romanticism and turn of the 20th century Neo-romanticism. Romantic thinkers highly valued mysticism and literature alike as irrational, extra-scientific activities. They believed that artists and poets, like mystics, describe not only the secret spiritual reality which was revealed to them and the powerful emotional event which they experienced. They also understood the poet’s moments of inspiration as moments of prophetic revelations of sacred truth.

42 See the chapter “Poetry, Mysticism and Metaphysics” in Maritain’s *Creative Intuition*, pp. 234-250.

Scholars of mysticism often mention literary works of modern writers as documentations of mystical experiences. Walt Whitman is often mentioned in R. M. Bucke's *Cosmic Consciousness: A Study in the Evolution of the Human Mind* (1901). Following Bucke, William James and Scholem after him mentioned Whitman as an example of the possibility of mysticism in modern literature.⁴³ Evelyn Underhill mentioned Dante and Blake.⁴⁴ The research of world literature is rich with books on mysticism in the works of Dante, Wordsworth, Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Rilke, Joyce, Tagore, Kafka, T.S. Eliot, Beckett, Célan and others, as well as in a specific period, movement or national literature. This rich literary research of mystical aspects in world literature is supported by philosophical and psychological methods of interpretation, as well as by stylistic analysis. This list of modern mystical poets and writers includes two unobservant Jews: Kafka and Célan. Why not turn to modern Hebrew literature and ask about its contact with mysticism?

Literature in Traditional Jewish Mysticism

The criteria which were offered above for a mystical literary text exclude a considerable group of the texts, which are generally considered to be an organic part of traditional Jewish mysticism. Texts with technical directions for the achievement of mystical experiences, biographies of mystics and reports about miracles are texts *about* mysticism; they thematically belong to mysticism, but they cannot be considered mystical literature in the full sense of the word. In contrast, many traditional Jewish mystical texts are clearly mystical literature, and can be seen as an integral part of Jewish literature, written in Hebrew, Aramaic or Yiddish.⁴⁵ The abundance of traditional mystical texts proves that the avoidance of personal experiences did not result

43 Bucke, *Cosmic Consciousness*, pp. 215-236; James, *The Religious Experience*, p. 396; Scholem, *Explications and Implications*, vol 1, p. 82. I would like to thank Stuart Shoffman for the reference to Bucke.

44 Underhill, *Mysticism*, pp. 135, 473.

45 In Israeli universities such texts are generally studied not in departments of Hebrew literature but in departments of "Jewish Thought" (*Makhshvet Israel*), and as a result their theological qualities overshadow their literary qualities, which are underestimated.

from the Jewish mystics' belief that it was impossible to express mystical experiences by words.

In comparison with Christianity and Islam, the character of Jewish mystical activity is more practical, because religious practice, including the practice of learning Torah, is so central to the religion. Jewish mystics constantly warn of extreme emotional experiences leading to unsocial behavior, and refrain from individualistic seclusion.⁴⁶ The constant interest in the nation's — not the individual's — fate is also characteristic of Jewish mysticism. All these can explain the non-personal character of Jewish traditional texts.

The traditional, Scholem-oriented reading of such texts tends to focus on the theological aspect, while their reading as literary texts is only now beginning to develop.⁴⁷ Until the 1980s the stamp of the theological-philosophical approach was dominant in the research of Jewish mysticism. Gershom Scholem, a student of the German academy on the one hand, and of the revolutionary Zionist ideology on the other, was interested mainly in the theosophical aspect and in the revolutionary role of Jewish mysticism. He systematically opposed any view of Jewish mysticism as literature. He harshly attacked Meyer Wiener, the editor of the anthology *Lyric der Kabbalah* (The Lyrics of Kabbalah 1917-1920), who translated into German many dozens of Jewish mystical poems from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, such as the Razi'el hymns, poems of Zefat Kabbalists (Azukri, Najara, Di Modena and others), as well as poets from Yemen, Italy and Poland, and even excerpts for the Karaitic literature.⁴⁸ Gershom Scholem's opposition to such views of Jewish mysticism influenced its research for more than half a century.

Until recently, research on Jewish mysticism treated with reservation the emotional aspect of the mystical texts. The writers' creative play, their joy, their exaltation, their emotional conflicts, their complex attitude to the terrestrial world, their wish to share with the reader their way to unity and their

46 Idel, "Seclusion," pp. 35-82.

47 The most impressing work which offers such a reading is Helner, *A River*. Such readings can be also found in Oron, *Ha-pli'ah and Ha-kaneh*; idem, "Ars Poetica in the Zohar"; Pechter, "Between Night and Morning."

48 Wiener, *Lyric der Kabbalah*; Scholem, "Lyric der Kabbalah?"; see also Brody and Wiener, *Selected Hebrew Poetry*.

mapping of the upper world, their tendency to ecstasy and even to madness — all these only recently came to light through research. The only exception is Rabbi Nahman's stories — uncharacteristic of Hassidic literature — which won the scholars' attention in spite of their irregularity, due to Martin Buber's work and because of their affinity to modernist literature.⁴⁹

Scholem was convinced that Jewish mysticism — in contrast to Christian — is poor in autobiographical and lyrical expressions.⁵⁰ The research of Jewish mysticism focused on the genres of apocalyptic visions, mystical *midrash* (whose most important representative is the Zohar),⁵¹ mystical *mussar* (moral teaching) literature, and Hassidic stories and preaching. The focus on these genres and the non-literary approach toward them strengthened the impression that in contrast to Christian and Moslem mystical literature, in Jewish mysticism, despite its quantity and the variety of its genres, it is difficult to find literary "lyrical" texts, namely lyrical poetry or personal confessions of mystical ecstasy, which are frequent in Christian and Moslem-Sufi literature. Poetic texts by Jewish mystics such as Shlomo Ibn Gabirol, Elazar Azikri, Moshe Zakut and Shalom Shabazi do not take a clear place in Scholem-oriented reviews of the history of Jewish mysticism.⁵² The poetry of Ibn Gabirol, and especially his long poem "*Keter Malhut*" (The Kingly Crown) is the only literary text which won relatively wide attention, maybe because of the high status Ibn Gabirol's *Mekor Hayim* (The Source of Life) has had in European philosophy.⁵³ Scholem denied Ibn Gabirol's influence on Kabbalah, which according to him began only in the 12th century.⁵⁴ Liebes, however, found in Gabirol's poetry clear traces and development of the creation theory found in

49 Elshtein, *Ecstasy and Hassidic Tale*; Mark, "On Laughter and Play"; Schleicher, *A Theory of Redemption*.

50 Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 16.

51 Idel, *New Perspectives*, pp. 11-13.

52 Many Jewish poetical mystical texts were examined by scholars, but their approach was generally non-literary. Exceptions are Grünwald, "The Ways of Midrash"; idem, "The Angels' Songs."

53 On *Keter Hayim* see Pines, Ibn Gabirol; Simon, "Ibn Gabirol"; Levin, *The Mystery*; Katz, "Poetry and Mystery"; Liebes, "I Love You."

54 Scholem, "Ibn Gabirol's Traces."

Sefer Yetsira (The Book of Creation), the first book of Jewish Kabbalah.⁵⁵ Scholem's reservations on Ibn Gabirol as an important Jewish mystic have become, so it seems, an obstacle not easy to overcome. The *heikhalot* literature and the excerpts of poetry in the Kumran scrolls were lately examined and analyzed in detail, again from the theological (and from the political) points of view, not as emotional or literary texts.⁵⁶

This situation undoubtedly has roots in the special character of Jewish mysticism. Diaries and documentation of mystical experiences — forms which appear frequently in Christian mysticism — are relatively rare in Hebrew,⁵⁷ and the majority of the existent texts is written in a matter-of-fact tone which does not convey too much emotion (maybe in order to emphasize their authenticity). Gershom Scholem wrote: "I tend to believe that this lack of sympathy to excessive personal self-expression is a result of, among other things, the fact that Jews kept a high sensitivity toward the contradiction between the mystical experience and the concept of God as creator, king and legislator."⁵⁸ He remarked that it was a result of the Jewish mystics' "masculine" identity.⁵⁹

In fact, theological wisdom is mixed with a powerful emotional-spiritual experience even in theosophical Kabbalistic texts, the Zohar being the most famous example, and even more so in texts whose literary character is clearer. Only theoretically can we distinguish between these two components and weigh their relative dominance.

Literary creativity is part of mystical experience in Jewish mysticism. The song was an important element in ancient Jewish mysticism. The writers of the *heikhalot* literature, considered to be the most ancient Jewish mystical literature, described the Jewish mystical experience as an ascent to heaven by a kingly chariot, while hearing and sharing the angels' singing to God. While ascending to "the seven temples" in heaven the *heikhalot* mystics saw the an-

55 Liebes, "I Love You"; Schlanger, "Ibn Gabirol."

56 Elior, *Temple and Chariot*.

57 See Pechter's introduction to Azikri, *Heavenly Words*, pp. 22-23; Werblowsky, *Rabi Yosef Karo*. On the mystical diaries of Rabbi ha-Nazir see Schwarz, *Religious Zionism*, pp. 149-197. On Rabbi Ashlag's diary see Garb, *The Chosen*, pp. 57-63.

58 Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 16.

59 Ibid.

gels who were singing before the heavenly throne, and did the same: they spoke the poetic language of the heavenly beings.⁶⁰ The song was a condition for seeing the Divine Chariot, for the secrets of the Torah were revealed only to those who knew the secret of the song. Rabbi Akiva said: “Having prayed the prayer [which he himself composed] I saw 640 ten thousands of angels of Honor standing against the Throne of Honor.”⁶¹ The composition of the song was the beginning of a process, which led the Jewish mystic to the sacred revelation. According to Altman, “the songs themselves serve here as a vehicle of ascent to Heaven.”⁶²

Although the Jewish anxiety about changing anything which “stands written” hindered the writing of personal prayers, in Hassidic circles it was common to compose spontaneous oral prayers.⁶³ In contrast to Kabbalists, who were studying the secrets of the divine world by means of interpretation of the Torah, the Hassidim developed individual prayer, story, singing and dance as mystical activities. This was a later development, even inside Hassidism. Seclusion, going out to nature, love — these were sometimes considered to be aids to the mystical process, but not its independent motivations.

Special to Jewish mysticism is the concept of Hebrew language (all its components included) as a revelation of God’s essence.⁶⁴ Perhaps the mere use of this sacred language, which for Diaspora Jews was high and mysterious like poetic language, loaded with multi-level interpretations, could fulfill the need to express mystical exaltation. The sacredness of the Torah’s language can explain the frequency of the mystical midrash genre in classical Jewish mysticism: the mere reading of the sacred text was, perhaps, a trigger for a mystical experience.

60 Altman, “Sacred Poems,” p. 44.

61 Ibid., p. 45.

62 Ibid., p. p. 46.

63 Meizl, *Tiferet Uziel*, p. 53; Nahman of Braslav, *Likutei*, p. 105.

64 Idel, *Abulafia*, pp. 23-43; Liebes, *The Teaching of Creation*, pp. 16-30.

Modern Hebrew Literature

The sacred status of Hebrew language disappeared when it became a living language. For a contemporaneous Israeli poet the mere writing in Hebrew is not an activity which can bring one closer to sacredness. In order to describe the mystical experience, the Israeli poet cannot depend on the power of a citation from the Torah either. He must find other means. The system of symbols and ideas, which was developed by traditional Jewish mysticism, is not sufficient for him any more. As a modern writer he wishes to express his unique personal experiences, to draw the mystic picture in a new, original way. Modern mystical poetry is then idiosyncratic and daring. It also links the modern reader to the sources of both Jewish and non-Jewish mysticism.

In English anthologies of mystical poetry one can find texts from various, far-away cultures, but no hint of modern Hebrew poetry.⁶⁵ Gershom Scholem in his aforementioned "Reflections on the Possibility of Mysticism Today" pointed at Aharon David Gordon (1856-1922) as a possible modern secular mystic, but did not hesitate to mention Walt Whitman as an example of a modern mystical poet. Scholem wrote:

A hundred years ago Walt Whitman sang the song of America from an absolute secular point of view [but] with a feeling of absolute sacredness. Walt Whitman is a conspicuous example for a phenomenon, which had many representatives during the last three generations. They realized that mystical experiences can still appear and grow in human beings, for this is an inherent human experience, which relates to the very essence of the human being, as long as it exists.⁶⁶

Did Scholem take it for granted that mysticism without belief in God is possible for non-Jews only? This is not the case, for he wrote that Kafka's writings are "a secular representation of a Kabbalistic reality."⁶⁷ Elsewhere Scholem called

65 In Albertson's anthology, *Lyra Mystica* (1932) the Hebrew poets are King David (the psalms) and Shlomo Ibn Gabirol.

66 Scholem, *Explications and Implications*, vol 1, p. 82.

67 Cited by Biale, *Gershom Scholem*, p. 215.

Kafka “the last inheritor of the Jewish mystical tradition.”⁶⁸ Moshe Idel concluded his book *Kabbalah: New Horizons* by referring to Kafka’s story “In Front of the Law” (also included in his novel *The Process*) as “an enlightening witness of Jewish mysticism’s remnants, still existent in a world where the confidence in human [mystical] activity collapsed,”⁶⁹ thus implying a distinction between a text which testifies to the authentic mystical experience of its writer and one which is only remotely connected to Jewish mysticism. In modern Hebrew literature there are many additional examples, clearer than Whitman and Kafka, of mysticism in modern Jewish literature. A few scholars of Jewish mysticism have been conscious of this fact, but they mentioned it only briefly.⁷⁰

Literary research about mysticism in modern Hebrew literature has been generally dedicated to one work of literature or to the work of one writer, without a perspective on the whole field. The basis for such research was either inter-textual or biographical. There has been almost no examination of the mystical experience as it is described in the text, of its unique formulation and of its connection with non-Jewish mystical traditions with which the writer had been acquainted.⁷¹

This was not only a result of the conventions which dominated the academic research of Jewish mysticism, but also of the conventions which dominated the scholarship of modern Hebrew literature since the foundation of Israel. When the Zionist messianic mood was transformed into a battle over everyday survival and technological progress, Israeli writers and thinkers rejected mystical ideas and moods and expressed post-Holocaust and post-War crises of beliefs and ideologies. They tended to adopt French Existentialist

68 Schoelm, *Kabbalah*, p. 17.

69 Idel, *New Perspectives*, p. 283. See also Alter, “Kafka as Kabbalist.”

70 See Oron, “Symbols”; idem, “Mystical Elements”; idem, “Death in the Zohar”; Elior, “Covering and Uncovering”; Liebes, “Zohar and Ratosch”; idem, *The Teaching of Creation*; Dan, *The Heart and the Fountain*.

71 Bialik’s poem “He Peeped and Died” is an exception. See Kurzweil, “He Peeped and Died”; Dan, “He Peeped and Died”; Lurie, “He Peeped and Died”; Luz, “He Peeped and Died”; Peles, “He Peeped and Died”; Barzel, “He Peeped and Died.” See also Barzel, *Mystery in Sh. Shalom’s Poetry*; Tsurit, *Amir Gilboa*; Minz-Manor, “Gilboa”; Lipsker, “Amira Hess”; Idem, *Sh. Shalom*; Liebes, “Zohar and Ratosch”; Rubinshtein, *Yehoshua Bar-Yosef*; Zimmerman, *Alterman*; idem, *Bialik*; Shalev, Alterman’s “The Joy of the Poor”; Lidovsky-Cohen, “Yona Wollach.”

philosophy and Anglo-American literary modernism. Some members of this generation, sometimes named “the state generation,” were educated by leftist youth movements; others were refugees from Western Europe. They rejected the ecstatic tone in literature, together with any belief in abstract values, preferring ironic tones, spoken language and images from everyday life. These preferences were common both to writers of literature and to dominant, influential literary critics, such as Nathan Zach, Binyamin Hrushovsky (Harshav), Gavriel Moked, Dan Miron and Shimon Sandbank. For them the word “mysticism” had pejorative connotations. These approaches, which were dominant in criticism and in research of Israeli literature, led to readings which were deaf to mystical elements.

In 1960s Baruch Kurzweil, an influential religious critic and scholar, wrote that modern Hebrew literature since the *haskalah* period (namely since the late 18th century) has distanced itself from its Jewish tradition and beliefs.⁷² And in fact, even today modern Hebrew literature is considered, especially within Israeli religious circles, to be a product of Zionist secular culture, which feeds the reader with ideas which are harmful to his Jewish life. From this point of view the *haskalah* movement and literature are looked at as the source of all the sins of secular Judaism.⁷³

In fact, modern Hebrew literature was created in a Zionist cultural context which, on the one hand, treated with suspicion extreme irrational moods and rejected the belief in any transcendent reality, but on the other hand absorbed neo-Romanticist and modernist attraction to mysticism, which led Jewish writers to the sources of Jewish mysticism. In the 1950s-1960s Israeli poetry turned to a direction which opposed mystical moods. The main representatives of this trend were Yehuda Amichai, Nathan Zach, David Avidan and Dan Pagis. At the same time, however, Dalia Rabikovich and Amir Gilboa were writing mystical poetry. (Reciprocally, in a period when central poets such as Bialik, Shlonsky, Alterman, Greenberg, Lamdan and Raab expressed mystical ecstasies, there were poets of opposite tendencies, such as Tchernikhovsky, Vogel, Yaakov Steinberg and Yaakov Fichman).

72 Kurzweil, *Elementary Problems*, pp. 13-32.

73 Bar-Yosef, “*Haskala* literature,” esp. p. 2.

Many view Zionist culture as if it was the opposite pole of traditional Judaism, modern Hebrew literature being its mouthpiece.⁷⁴ Jewish terms and symbols in Zionist discourse were understood as if they were a hollow political manipulation, devoid of real religious contents.⁷⁵ Others have found in Zionism, especially in the second *aliya* (1904-1914), contacts with Hassidism and a wish to continue its values.⁷⁶ For example, the writings of A.D. Gordon, the major spiritual leader of the *Avoda* movement, bear the clear stamp of Hassidism.⁷⁷ Many early 20th century Zionist writers came from Hassidic families, and sometimes the distance from their homes strengthened the nostalgia to the lost Jewish life and the wish to find a continuation to the tradition of Jewish sacredness in the new reality. For example, Avraham Shlonsky and Uri Zvi Greenberg described the Zionist pioneer's experiences as a transformation of the Jewish sacred rituals.⁷⁸ The Zionist educational system, both formal and informal (the youth movements) cultivated the value of the land's sacredness, which was expressed in the literary works of Israeli-born writers, such as S. Yizhar, O. Hillel and Hayim Guri. It is possible, of course, to say that these writers used terms of Jewish sacredness metaphorically, devoid of their real religious contents, but — as argued above — it is not simple to prove it.

During the early- and mid-20th century observant writers, such as Rabbi Kook, Yosef Zvi Rimmon and Zelda (Schneiurson-Mishkovsky), were writing and publishing mystical Hebrew poetry in Eretz-Israel, simultaneously with non-observant writers. At the turn of the 21st century the contacts between Israeli literature and mysticism were getting firmer, mysticism attracting to it even writers who began their writing career far away from the world of mysticism. During the last third of the 20th century the number of young observant Israeli writers has been steadily growing, and the majority of them write mystical poems.

74 Dan, *the Heart and the Fountain*, pp. 63-65.

75 Don-Yihya, "Secularization and Judaism."

76 Almog, "Religious Values"; Shapira, "Religious Motifs."

77 Shapira, *A.D. Gordon*.

78 Bar-Yosef, "The Sacred Land."

The Traces of Western Literature

Mystical elements in 20th century Hebrew literature have roots not only in Jewish, but also in non-Jewish, especially Christian, mysticism. Mysticism penetrated Hebrew literature through literary movements in Europe, especially Romanticism and Symbolism. Romantic poets often described the yearnings for unity with primary sources of sacredness and the moments of extreme spiritual ecstasy.

Mystical experiences in both Romantic and Symbolist literatures were shaped according to the relevant cultural contexts: these literary movements had tight contacts with Christianity in general, and with Christian Middle Ages mysticism in particular, sometimes blurring the borders between early Christianity and Judaism or between Christian and Jewish Kabbalah. Accordingly, sacredness was attributed to suffering, sacrifice, altruism and the internalization of religious life. Romanticism also inherited from Christian mystical and apocalyptic theory motifs such as the pilgrimage, the light, spiritual love, and redemption through catastrophe. In Romanticism the traditional religious value of asceticism, holy study, prayer and learning the scriptures, was almost deleted, together with the semi-scientific, cosmological elements characteristic of Jewish and Christian Kabbalah.

Romantic mysticism attributed to the poet qualities which until that time were attributed to the mystic. The Romantics viewed the poet as a person who lived on a different, higher level of reality. Love, inner freedom, contact with nature, artistic inspiration, internal voyage to the world of imagination and of childhood — these are some of the experiences which Romantic literature described as mystical. To them were added values which were connected with the political role of Romanticism: folkways and social non-conformity. In contrast to religious mysticism, where such practices could only be a starting point or an aid to mystical process, in Romantic poetry sacredness was to be found in these situations for themselves.

Western Symbolism, originally French, was to a certain extent a continuation of Romanticism (hence its alternative name, “neo-Romanticism”).

However, it brought new elements: in contrast to the Romantic cult of Nature, it emphasized the sacredness of the aesthetic experience and its artful expression; in contrast to Romantic cult of revival it sanctified self-annihilation; in contrast to Romantic belief in natural self expression, it discovered the inexpressible nature of the Sacred. Symbolism focused on elements which were peripheral in Romanticism: the magic role of the poetic language, the Dionysian masculine ecstasy, the paradoxical nature of reality, the metaphysical status of Evil, the cancellation of conventional ethics. Russian Symbolism (based on Eastern Orthodox Christianity) added motifs of asceticism and sacrifice, strengthened apocalyptic motifs and emphasized the feminine character of the Divine world. The creators of modern Hebrew literature knew European and Russian literature as well as Jewish mysticism. The fact that Christian motifs penetrated Jewish mysticism enabled them to combine the two traditions, and to make their literary work an inter-cultural bridge.

Three Basic Elements

Beginning in the 17th century European scholars of mysticism approached mystical phenomena from the theological point of view. During the 19th century sociological and anthropological researches appeared. The emotional aspect of mysticism became a focus of academic interest in the 20th century. Scholars have been trying to define and classify the emotional characteristics of the mystical experience; the situations which support and motivate its appearance; the activities which enable it; and its physical symptoms.⁷⁹ At the same time there has been a growing consciousness of the influence of the cultural and religious background of mystics and scholars on

79 On approaches to research of mysticism see McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, pp. 266-343. On the history of mysticism scholarship see Margolin, *The Temple of Man*, pp. 3-54. On the general characteristics of the mystical experience see Bucke, *Cosmic Consciousness*; James, *The Religious Experience*; Underhill, *Mysticism*; Lasky, *Ecstasy*; Heiler, *Prayer*; Hollenback, *Mysticism*, pp. 40-74; Merkur, *Unitive Experience*; Sharfshtein, *The Mystical Experience*; Deikman, "Deautomatization." Criticism of the theological approach and recommendation to focus on the emotional aspect of mysticism by using semiotic, literary and psychological methods - see Idel, "Unio Mystica as a Criterion."

their understanding and verbalization of the mystical experience, and to the difference between inner-cultural (of mystics and those who share their world view) and outer-cultural (of scholars who belong to another culture) views of mysticism.⁸⁰ These developments in the scholarship of mysticism enable us to acknowledge the mystical nature of experiences which were described by Hebrew poets and prose writers during the 20th century. They also encourage the examination of these texts in their cultural contexts.

Jewish mysticism was also examined at first from a theosophical or sociological point of view. Since the late 1980s, interest in Jewish mysticism as an emotional and physical phenomenon began to grow. Contemporary scholars of Jewish mysticism acknowledge the fact that mystical experiences include not only beliefs but also strong emotions, and between these two components there are inseparable interconnections.⁸¹

Research on Jewish mysticism partly focuses on characteristics which are common to Jewish and non-Jewish mysticism, and partly emphasizes the uniqueness of Jewish mysticism in comparison to and in contrast with general mysticism, as it was defined by scholars of Christian backgrounds. Among the studies one can find objections even to the use of the term “mysticism” in the Jewish context, and preference for the term “*hamistorin ha-yeudi*” (Jewish mystery).⁸² However, all scholars of Jewish mysticism agree that in spite of its unique character, Jewish mysticism absorbed various elements of contemporary non-Jewish culture. Throughout its long history, Jewish mysticism included elements which — from the emotional point of view — were common to general mysticism, although formulated by specific Jewish language.⁸³ According to this approach, the mystical experience in modern Hebrew poetry will be examined according to its emotional universal characteristics, according to its unique style and according to the autobiographical and cultural background of the poet.

80 See Smart, “Interpretation.”

81 On interconnections between the emotional and theological components in the teaching of the BESHT see Etkes, “The BESHT as a Mystic,” p. 421.

82 Dan, *The Heart and the Fountain*, p. 9; Liebes, “Reflections”; Pedaia, “Interview,” p. 171.

83 See, for example, Idel, *New Perspectives*, pp. 75-91; idem., “Universalization and Integration”; Liebes, “Christian influences on the Zohar”; Wolfson, *Through a Spectrum*.

Many scholars tried to list the elements of the mystical experience.⁸⁴ The presence and the relative importance of each element are the subjects of continuing debate, but it is clear to all that this experience is a strong and short inner occurrence, and that its composition is of a cluster of interconnected characteristics. The majority of scholars agree on three elements whose presence in and importance to the mystical experience, both Jewish and non-Jewish, is clear:⁸⁵

a) Unity with sacredness

b) Ecstasy

c) Visions and other concrete perceptions which symbolically express the meeting with the sacred world.

None of these three components, when it appears in a text separately, is enough to form a basis for the argument that the text is mystical. The mystical experience I am interested in is neither a non-ecstatic continuing contact with sacredness nor an abnormal extreme ecstatic mood which does not have a sacred goal (such as hysteria, a trance, or an obsession), nor any symbolic description of visions which does not include a yearning for the unity with sacredness. Although I shall focus on each of the three components separately, the poems which will be examined here include all of the three, in different dosages.

84 See, for example, James, *The Religious Experience*, pp. 249-251; Underhill, *Mysticism*, pp. 70-80; Hollenback, *Mysticism*, pp. 40-41. For a review and an analysis of the disagreements see Merkur, "Unitive Experience."

85 Scholars of mysticism tend to discuss one the following three elements while including in it other elements. For example, to discuss "ecstasy" together with unity (Underhill, *Mysticism*, pp. 379-358; Buber, *Ecstatic Confessions*; Lasky, *Ecstasy*), or to discuss unity together with ecstasy (Idel, "Universalization and Integration"), or to discuss symbolic visions together with ecstasy (Pedaia, *The Vision and the Speech*). The reason is that these elements are co-present in the mystical experience.

Identifying Mysticism in Modern Poetry

The multi-level, metaphoric nature of the literary text, especially of poetry, makes it possible to avoid its mystical character. However, a reader learned in mysticism will generally be sensitive (sometimes oversensitive) to the mystical meaning of a poem. What makes a poem worthy of being included in an anthology of mystical poems?

We have tried to answer this question from a theoretical point of view; now we shall examine a few examples. Here is a fragment of text which was found among the posthumous literary works of Avraham Ben-Yitzhak. Ben-Yitzhak (the pen-name of Avraham Sonne, 1883-1950) lived a secular life, but was acquainted with traditional Jewish literature, including Kabbalah and Hassidism. This fragment in its original Hebrew contains four words only: /נעלה נרות הרוח/ במחשכינו⁸⁶. The English literal translation is: “We shall (or perhaps: Let us) raise (or: kindle) the spirit’s (or: the wind’s) candles/ in our darknesses [sic!].” This is a poetic text. The words are ambiguous and loaded with connotations. The sounds are musical: there are alliterations of N and R, and if the poem is read in Ashkenazi accentuation (which Ben-Yitzhak apparently used), a Homeric dactyl can be heard, which is amazing to find in such a small text. Well known symbols (light-darkness) are used in an original way: the light is of *inner* candles, which we have to raise or kindle *in ourselves*. There is no allusion to Kabbalistic or Hassidic text. The writer was not a religious person in the conventional sense of the word. Still, without the aid of biographical or inter-textual aids, this text can be read as a mystical poetic text. Why?

This tiny text creates an atmosphere of mystery, by the image of candles flickering in the darkness. Ben-Yitzhak expressed his feeling that “we” live in a spiritual darkness, devoid of sacredness. He expressed the need to be redeemed of this “darkness” by “raising the candles of spirit.” “Light” here cannot be interpreted as referring to Enlightenment, because this is a light that should be kindled from within, without external movement; sun, not candles, would be the appropriate symbol for the light of Enlightenment. In the Bible light is

⁸⁶ Ben-Yitzhak, *Poems*, p. 35.

God's first creation. Here the readers are called to create their own light, in a moment when they feel God-like. In raising the spirit's lights we are supposed to transform our inner world, which here has mythic, cosmic dimensions. Thus the border between the human and the divine is blurred. These traits connect this tiny literary fragment to the tradition of mystical expression.

For a fuller understanding of this fragmental text, we should also pay attention to its contemporaneous traits. The unusual (in mystical texts) use of the plural ("we") reflects Ben-Yitzhak's double cultural context: on the one hand Western European early modernism, with its individualism and pessimism, and on the other hand Zionism and neo-Hassidism, where togetherness was sacred (see ch. 5). The poet sees redemption as a collective act, overcoming the individuality of the modern artist and intellectual. The symbol of candles hints at the importance of roots in the religious tradition. In the Zionist cultural context, work and dance functioned as redemptive activities. In contrast, the poet proposed here a non-physical, purely spiritual redemption. The word *na'aleh* (we shall raise/let us raise/ let us kindle) is of special interest here, as it can also be understood as: let us make *aliya*. Ben-Yitzhak, however, proposed a non-conventional *aliya*, which has nothing to do with the external, secular aims of Zionism. This fragment is then both a continuation of mystical tradition and a modern, contemporary piece of literature.

Let us now look at one of Avraham Ben-Yitzhak's full-fledged poems, "The Lonely Say."⁸⁷

יום ליום ינחיל שמש דועכת
ולילה על לילה יקונו.
וקיץ אחר קיץ יאסף בשלכת
ועולם מצערו מתרונן.

ומחר נמות, ואין הדבר בנו,
וכיום צאתנו נעמד לפני שער עם נעילה.
ולב כי יעלה: הן אלהים קרבנו,
והתנחם וחרד מפני המעילה.

87 Ben-Yitzhak, *Poems*, pp. 64-67. The poem was first published in 1917, earlier versions from 1910 and 1914 were found in his posthumous writings.

יום ליום ישא שמש בוערת
 ולילה אחר לילה ישפך כוכבים,
 על שפתי בודדים שירה נעצרת:
 בשבע דרכים נתפצל ובאחד אנו שבים.

In literal translation : “Day to day bequeaths a glimmering sun/ and night laments for night/ And summer after summer is gathered up in leaf fall/ And the world is singing from its sorrow.”

And tomorrow we shall die wordless/ And the same as on the day of parting we shall stand before the gate at closing time/ And if the heart rejoices: indeed God has brought us close [to Him]/ It will then repent [from joy] and will tremble in fear of treachery (betrayal)// Day to day bears (carries) a burning sun/ And night after night pours out stars, / Upon the lips of the lonely (the few) song comes to a halt:/ Into seven paths we divide (part), and by one (One) we return.”⁸⁸

Former interpretations of this poem saw its thematic center in the poet's loneliness, or in his consciousness of death, or in the artist's silence, or in the traumas of the First World War.⁸⁹ These interpretations avoided the fact that the point of view of the speaker in this poem is located not on earth, but in a much higher point, from which it is possible to see the whole cosmos, the changes of the celestial bodies, and even the gate which leads to the divine space. In earlier versions of this poem more terrestrial images appeared, but the poet “cleaned” these details in this final version.⁹⁰ The upper space which is revealed here is the characteristic space seen by the mystic, which includes all the worlds, where man and God act reciprocally. The poem's space is the border or the passage between the human and the divine words, which is central in mysticism.

In the three first lines of the poem we see all of existence in a depressing, monotonous, unchangeable situation. We are confronted with existential, metaphysical decadence. The world is withering, crushed and trampled. This situation seems unchangeable, for it is an incurably sad inheritance, which the

88 This translation is based on Dan Pagis' translation and interpretation of this poem in Burnshaw et als., *The Modern Hebrew Poem Itself*, pp. 58-59.

89 Aran, *With Poems and Poets*, p. 20; Even-Zohar, *Literary Criticism*, pp. 42-46; Pagis pp. 58-59; Hever, *The Blossom of Silence*, pp. 98-99.

90 See Ben-Yitzhak, *Poems*, p. 66.

days and the seasons “bequeath” to each other. In the fourth line, however, a miracle happens. Paradoxically, from the depths of sorrow a cosmic celestial music, perhaps the singing of the angels, is bursting forth, as if darkness is a condition to the creation of light. This is a well known mystical motif.

In the second stanza the human condition is presented in the moment of death, when we stand on the border between the two worlds. Can we “rejoice” in such a moment? The third line of this stanza states that contact with God can give man a feeling of joy, even if it will happen only after death. However, this contact is doubtful. “We” are standing before the gate at closing time, an image well known from Kafka’s “In Front of the Law.” The source of this image, common to Kafka and Ben-Yitzhak, is the *ne’ila* (closing) Yom Kippur prayer: “Open to us a gate/ in the closing time of the gate.” Why is the gate not open for us in Ben-Yitzhak’s poem? Because we stand before it “*ve-ein ha-diber banu*” — without words, and also without having fulfilled the commandments (“*diber*” in Hebrew means both speech and one of the Ten Commandments), namely we have no moral sacredness, which can be achieved by fulfilling the commandments. The joyful expectations to the contact with God therefore retreat, and the fear of “betrayal” comes instead.

The word “*me’ila*” (betrayal, playing with the sound of “*ne’ila*”) here is connected with the biblical sin of the eating from the sacrifice which was brought to the temple,⁹¹ and even more so with mishnaic discussion of the possibility that the priest himself would eat from the sacrifice instead of using it only for the sacred ritual.⁹² The poet uses these allusions in order to hint at his contemporaries’ (and his own) betrayals or abuses of their sacred duties and beliefs, maybe also of their lives, which are devoid of purity. This is why the upper gate is closed before them.

The third stanza begins with a wonderful change of atmosphere from pessimism into ecstasy: the sun is not just glimmering, it burns, and its fire is carried on by the days, alluding to “Day to Day will express a speech” (Psalms 19:3). The nights generously pour their stars, alluding to “I’ll pour my sayings before you” (Psalms 142:3). The lonely ones stand before the gate without

91 Leviticus 5:15-16.

92 Albek, *Mishna*, Kodoshim, pp. 269-288.

knowing whether they can join the divine singing, or they will be punished of their “betrayal,” and be left outside, with no speech and no commandments. The song in their mouths stops, but at the same time they also sing together their mysterious, sacred song, whose words conclude the poem: “In seven paths/ways we part and in one we return.”

In this last line of the poem there is an interesting grammatical discrepancy: “*derekh*” (way, path) in Hebrew is generally used in the feminine (although it is occasionally used as masculine as well), so it’s possible to say “*sheva drakhim*” (seven paths), using “seven” in the feminine form, but then it says “*u-ve-ekhad*” using “one” in the masculine! Why? This raises the possibility that the word “one” should not be understood literally, that it hints to something more than a mere number. “One” is the concluding word of the *Shema Yisrael* prayer, the cardinal Jewish prayer, which should also be said before death. “To die in One” is an expression for a martyr’s death “on *Kiddush ha-Shem*” (originally said regarding Rabbi Akiva).⁹³ “One” can also be used for the name of God.

What, then, is the meaning of “*u-ve-ekhad*” here? Like the seven divine spheres, which are separated, but will bring redemption through their unity with the One, the lonely ones, when they return together from their separated ways, reach a sacred unity. This unity is their hope for correspondence with the sacred, their chance to enter the divine gate.

The unity of the “we” here is neither national nor social (thus this poem deviates from popular Zionist conventions). It is a spiritual unity of these lonely intellectuals and artists who wish to express sacred poetry. In contrast to its folkloric character in Hassidism, which was popular in contemporary Hebrew literature, Ben-Yitzhak takes mysticism back to its aristocratic, esoteric, secluded place in Western-Christian tradition and in Kabbalah. The poetic polished form of this poem and the patterns of paradox which organize its structure speak of Symbolist influence, which Ben-Yitzhak could have inherited from Rilke’s poetry.

In order to sharpen the distinction between a mystical and a non-mystical modern poem, let us now briefly compare two poems which present the same situation: both describe a landscape a short time after the rain has stopped.

93 Berakhot 61 p. 2.

Both were written by secular poets. The first is an untitled poem by David Vogel (1899-1944), from his book *Before the Dark Gate* (Vienna 1923)⁹⁴, the second is the poem “Birth” by Amir Gilboa (1917-1984), from his book *Poems in the Morning in the Morning* (Tel-Aviv 1953).⁹⁵

★

אחר הגשם
רפרף תמהון בהיר
על השדות החרדים.

רוח חתר כהה
בין קפלי דגל חור

ובין אשכולות נצה סגולה.

עננים נוסעים נסכו קרעי לכן
אל הברכה הנכאה.

ורעפי גג
שחקו אדמים
תוך דמעות.

★

After the rain
bright astonishment hovered
upon the worried fields.

A wind broke dark
into the pale flag's pleats.

Traveling clouds offered tatters of whiteness
To the gloomy lake.

And tiles
slightly laughed
red, within tears.

94 Vogel, *Poems*, p. 52.

95 Gilboa, *Poems*, vol. 1, p. 198. Translated by Mintz, *Modern Hebrew Poetry*, p. 252.

הולדת

הגשם חלף.

והוא עוד מגגות ומעצים

מזמר על ראשי

בהנומה כחלחלת.

אשריך, אלהי,

ברשתך נצוד הילד.

הנה אקריב

עלה אל עלה

ואראה איך מכסה עלה על עלה

ומתמזגים הרסיסים.

ואקרא לכלולות משמי

את הרסיסים.

וכל חלוני

אעטר עצים.

אשריך, אלהי,

ברשתך נצוד הילד.

אני פוקח את עיני —

אדמתי רחבה מאד

וכלה מקשה

של פטורי ציצים

ירקים.

הו אלהי, איך היינו חבוקים!

Birth

The rain has passed.
 And yet from roofs and trees
 It sings in my ears
 And covers my head with a bluish bridal-veil.

Good for you, my God,
 In your net the child has been caught.
 Now I shall bring leaf close to leaf