



Universität Potsdam

Karl Erich Grözinger

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HANDLING OF HOLY TRADITIONS AS A PATH TO MYSTICAL UNITY IN THE *KITVE HA-'IYYUN*

The writings from the thirteenth century called by Gershom Scholem¹ the "Writings of the 'Iyyun circle" are one of the most intriguing chapters of early kabbalah – this I need not to elaborate on as it is a well known fact to anyone whoever had read these texts or the literature about them. When reading these texts, one gets the impression as if the authors had at hand a box full of terms and phrases into which everybody could just stick his hand and take terms and phrases out of it in order to arrange them according to his own taste, disregarding the meaning they have in the writings of his fellow kabbalists. The result was, that we now have before us a large number of varying mosaic pictures in which we detect again and again the same mosaic pebbles, however composed differently.

One may find there, for example, the arrangement of those terms and phrases in speculative philosophic tractates strongly reminding of the medieval philosophy – like treatises as for example the book of the Five Substances by Pseudo Empedocles,² the writings of Isaak Israeli,³ the so called Theology of Aristotle⁴ and the texts of Ibn Gevirol.⁵

On the other hand, one finds here the arrangement of the materials in a fashion we are used to from our knowledge of the ancient *Hekhalot* and *Merkavah* traditions, that is in the style of descriptions of the celestial palaces with angels and the throne of glory, or as an interpretation of the *Merkavah* as visioned by Ezekiel. Moreover, there are arrangements affiliated to the tradition of the *Sefer Yezirah* and the sefirotic system of *Sefer ha-Bahir*, that is arrangements according to the later canonic tradition of the ten *sefirot*. Apart from that, we meet here with arrangements of the mentioned materials in catalogues of the 32 Paths of

1. Cf. *Reshit ha-Kabbalah*, Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, 1948; *Origins of the Kabbalah* (Engl. Translation by A. Arkush, ed. R.J.Z. Werblowsky, Princeton, 1987).

2. Cf. D. Kaufmann, *Studien über Salomon Ibn Gabirol*, Budapest, 1899 (Reprint, Gregg, 1972).

3. Cf. A. Altmann a. S. M. Stern, *Isaac Israeli, Scripta Judaica I*, Oxford, 1958.

4. German Translation by F. Dieterici, Leipzig, 1883 (Reprint Hildesheim, 1969).

5. *Fons Vitae*, ed. C. Baeumker, Münster, 1895; Hebr. Translation, Y. Bluvstein, *Mekor Hayyim*, Jerusalem, 1925/6; French Translation, J. Schlanger, *Salomon Ibn Gabirol, Livre de la Source de Vie*, Paris, 1970.

Wisdom, stemming again from *Sefer Yezirah*, or in catalogues of the 13 *middot* as known from Exodus 34 and the early rabbinic literature. Additional compositions organize the materials as commentaries to the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet or as an enumeration of the divine name of 42 letters, or as a commentary to the *Shem ha-meforash* of four letters. Finally we find the same terms and phrases arranged in the form of a prayer, even in the form of a *Shmone Esreh* or as a composition of divine powers corresponding to the shape of the human body and the more.

Of course there are mixtures of all these different styles of speaking and arrangements as well, especially in the longer versions of *Sefer ha-'Iyyun* itself and in the *Midrash Shim'on ha Zadik*.

All these are well known facts and there have been efforts for explanations by Gershom Scholem,⁶ Marc Verman⁷ or by Joseph Dan⁸ who dwelled on the different competing traditions of the 10 *sefirot* and the 13 *middot* respectively.

The authors of our texts themselves were, however, not unaware of these seemingly contradictory traditions. And we possess the well known *responsum* of Pseudo Hai Ga'on in which the author argues that there is no real contradiction between the tradition of the 10 *sefirot* and the 13 *middot*, but, he maintains, that both traditions describe the same intelligible reality⁹:

The thirteen *middot* of which the Tora speaks are branches and derivations that proceed from the ten degrees which are called *sefirot*. The ones are corresponding to the others, including three hidden ones [...]

The word used here to identify the obviously contradicting traditions is the Hebrew word *keneged* – a term very frequent in the *'Iyyun* texts. Besides the term *keneged*, our texts use another term in order to identify different traditions with each others, namely the noun *remez*, that is a hint, or an allusion.

We may ask here if this identification of conflicting traditions is only a measure out of embarrassment or is it perhaps part of a positive and systematic program? And if so, can we find in this program of identifying opposing traditions an answer to the intriguing picture of the *Iyyun* literature as depicted above?

There are indeed some hints in our texts which might help us to find an answer to this question. The first lines of the central book of this literature give it the title *Sefer ha-'Iyyun*, using by this a term denoting philosophical speculation. And indeed, this book, in its short version,¹⁰ is,

6. *Origins of the Kabbalah*, cf. above.

7. *Sifre ha-Iyyun*, Diss. Harvard, Cambridge Mass., 1984; now in print : *The Book of Contemplation*, Albany, 1992.

8. *Huge ha-Mekubbalim ha-Rishonim*, ed. J. Agassi, Jerusalem, Akademon, 1983/4.

9. A. Jellinek, *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Kabbala*, Leipzig, 1852, II, p. 11.

10. Cf. M. Verman, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

regarding its style, shape and outlook, very close to neoplatonic speculative tracts, describing the intelligible world beginning with the highest entity down to the celestial spheres. We should therefore understand the title of the book quite technically as *The book of Philosophic Speculation about the Innermost [entities]*, a title matching very well the primary short version of the book.

It is now highly interesting to note that the book, when leaving the speculative language and using the more traditional ways of Jewish speaking, as the language of angelology or the language of onomatology, that is speaking in terms of divine names¹¹ – in these cases, the author is using the above mentioned term *keneged* as an introductory formula, indicating by this word, that he is now switching the way of speaking, I shall return to this point shortly.

Beforehand we should have a look to the longer version of the *Sefer ha-'Iyyun*.¹² Here we are confronted with an additional remark regarding the treatment of the subject matter, namely :

And Rav Hammay explicated all the topic of the Innermost in the composition of this treatise '*al-derekh Ma'aseh Merkavah we-perush Nevu'at Yehezqel*, [that is :] he explicated it in the method or language of the Divine Throne and as a commentary to the prophecy of Ezekiel.¹³

From this we may learn, that the writer of this longer version was well aware of the fact that on the side of the '*Iyyun*-style of speech, that is the style of the philosophic speculation, there exists another way of explaining the same matters, namely the way or method of the ancient *Merkavah* traditions. And indeed, this longer version of the *Sefer ha-'Iyyun* has undergone a strong influence and reshaping by *Merkavah* traditions. The author thus maintains – as Maimonides had done before him – that describing the *Merkavah* is just a different way of speaking about metaphysics; metaphysics and *Ma'aseh Merkavah* thus being basically the same thing but a different style of language.

We can further find clear statement about the different ways of speaking regarding the same topic, namely in an enumeration of the *Sheloshah 'Asar Kohot*,¹⁴ the 13 divine powers. There we are told that each of these 13 potencies has a definite name and that each of these names has two aspects, one aspect '*al-derekh ha-Hokhmah* and one aspect '*al derekh ha-Hawayot*, that is to say, one aspect is according to the "way of wisdom", or intellect, and the other one according to the way of permu-

11. Cf. K. E. Grözinger, "The Names of God and the Celestial Powers : Their Function and Meaning in the Hekhalot Literature", in : *Proceedings of the First International Conference on the History of Jewish Mysticism*, Early Jewish Mysticism, Jerusalem, 1987, p. 53ff; German version in FJB 13, 1985.

12. Verman, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

13. *Op. cit.*, p. 45. 51.

14. Verman, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

tations of the *Shem Hawaya*, that is the Divine name *alef, heh, waw, yud*.¹⁵ And we need not to be astonished to find under the heading '*al derekh Hokhmah*' precisely the names of the powers enumerated already in *Sefer ha-'Iyyun*. Thus, the language '*al derekh ha-Hokhmah*' obviously is identical with the language *al derekh ha-'Iyyun*.

Finally, in a related enumeration of the 13 *middot*,¹⁶ we find a threefold list of the 13 *middot*. And here each *middah* is given three different types of names. These three types of nomenclature we may safely call :

'*al derekh ha-Hawayot*

'*al derekh ha-Hokhmah* and

'*al derekh ha-Middot* .

In the first column of this threefold list of the 13 *middot* we find therefore 13 permutations of the *Shem Hawayah, alef, heh, waw, yod*, that is '*al-derekh ha-Hawayot*. And in the second column are enumerated 13 terms '*al-derekh ha-'Iyyun*' as we find them in *Sefer ha-'Iyyun* (short) and finally, in the third column, we find the names of the 13 *middot* according to Exodus 34 – this is the language '*al derekh ha-Middot*.

This threefold list of the thirteen powers is in addition combined with the neoplatonic notion that the forms of all beings are being repeated and represented on the different levels of the cosmical hierarchy in different ways, according to each specific level, as for example : in the cosmic Intellect the forms are present in an intellectual quality, in the cosmic Soul in a psychological quality and in Nature in a natural quality – this notion expresses the unity of the ontological forms in the diversity of the cosmical levels.

Here in our '*Iyyun*-text this notion is expressed in the following way : The 13 *middot* are on the highest level represented as expressed '*al derekh ha-Hawayot* on the second level they are present as expressed '*al derekh ha-Hokhmah* and on the third level as expressed '*al derekh ha-Middot*.¹⁷

From this observation we can venture the following conclusion : By describing the same realities in different languages, that is '*al derekh ha-Iyyun*, '*al derekh Ma'aseh Merkavah*, '*al derekh ha-Shemot*, '*al derekh ha-Hawayot*, '*al derekh ha-Sefirot*, '*al derkh ha-Middot* etc. these early kabbalists wanted to express this central neoplatonic idea, namely that the divine reality manifests itself in different ways, but nevertheless remains the same unique divine reality. That is to say : the same divine essence reveals itself in various ways, expressed by different ways of speaking -ways of speaking that differ indeed, but which are maintained as being one and unified regarding the essence they are dealing with.

15. Cf. Verman, p. 89.

16. Verman, p. 93.

17. Verman, p. 93.

We should now ask, if our texts give us a hint which could support this conclusion. And indeed, there are formulations which seem to foster this conclusion. There is one very important and central term in this literature which it shares with Azriel from Gerona, namely the term *hashwa'at ha-'ahdut*.¹⁸ This term denotes in Azriel's writings, as already Scholem had pointed out, the *coincidentia oppositorum* or the total *indistinctio*, and this is the very ontic level on which all differences are united in total oneness. Here in the 'Iyyun text this term expresses a similar idea, namely the indistinct unity of the divine powers. But in at least some places the term is used to state that the mentioned different series of divine powers are not contradictory but that the diverse catalogues of powers are as a matter of fact one. Let us take for example a statement from the *Midrash Shim'on ha-Zadik*. There we read¹⁹:

When it arose in the mind of the Lord to bring into existence all His works He created one first power and they called it 'Eternal Wisdom' (*Hokhmah Qeduma*)[...] and it is called 'Eternal' because from this wisdom emanated the twelf mentioned powers and it is equal (*keneged*) to the ten [powers] *be-hashwa'at ha-'ahdut*, in absolute unity, and these are the 'Eser sefirot belimah, the ten *Sefirot belimah*, [about which we learn in the *Sefer Yezirah*].

Here in this statement we face the identification of the *Hokhmah Qeduma* as the emanator of the 13 *middot* with the ten *sefirot* from *Sefer Yezirah* by means of the philosophic term *hashwa'at ha-'ahdut*.

From this we may draw the following further conclusion : By propounding the diverse traditions of divine potencies or by using different ways of language and interpretation, these kabbalists might have intended to demonstrate or even to bring about the divine unity out of the diversity. That is, the different modes of interpretation or enumeration of the divine potencies are a mystical way aiming for the divine unity. The use of different traditions in describing the divine reality, and the use of different ways of speaking and interpretation seems, therefore, to have been a major task in the mystical piety of these kabbalists.

If this conclusion is correct, it might help us to get a new solution for the problem of the original meaning and source of the enigmatic *PaRDeS* as an acronym for the four ways of biblical interpretation, mentioned for the first time in the writings of another kabbalist, namely the nearly contemporary author of the *Zohar*, R. Moshe de Leon.

The common interpretation of this acronym is not really fostered by the early traditions as Albert van der Heide pointed out at the first congress of our association in Oxford. There, van der Heide stated :

18. Cf. G. Scholem, *Origins*, pp. 365 ff; K.E. Grözinger, "Theosophie, Historiosophie und 'Anthroposophie' des Kabbalisten Azriel aus Gerona", in *FJB*, 14, 1986, pp. 11-151.

19. Cf. Verman, p. 78f.

... the choice of the terms *remez* and *sod* in this particular [common] meaning is not supported by the sources and is in fact quite accidental. With *peshat* and *derash* (instead of the more usual midrash), they *had to make up the world-play Pardes!*²⁰

And why did they have to make up precisely the word *Pardes*? Of course in order to match the talmudic-mystical tradition of the Four who entered the *Pardes* (tHag. 2, 3-5 parallels) – a term which denoted since that time the higher mystical or philosophical²¹ access to wisdom. When we scrutinize the obviously first appearance of the acronym *PaRDeS* in the writings of Moshe de Leon, we realize, that he himself used the term *Pardes* seemingly in a way quite similar to the above described use of different traditions in the *'Iyyun* texts. The application of *Pardes*-interpretation to biblical texts had for Moshe de Leon obviously a similar aim as the enumeration and combination of the various traditions in the *Iyyun* texts, namely, so to speak, to lead to a demonstration of the *hashwa'at ha-'ahdut*.

In the responsum of Moshe de Leon published by Yeshaya Tishby,²² Moshe de Leon emphasizes that there is no difference between the verse in Gen. 36, 12 reading “And Timna was the concubine of Eliphaz” and the verse “I am the Lord thy God” (Ex. 20, 2) :

And all these [different] tales are in reality the one and single mystery of God, and they are altogether included in the Lord's thoughtful Wisdom, in the mystery of His name. And when man removes the veil of blindness from his eyes then he will find in this tale and story a mountain of perfume and incense. Then his blind eyes will be opened and he will rejoice in his mind and will say : ‘Who art thou big mountain raising to the high, which has been hidden here at the day of the event’ – as I explained in the book which I wrote under the title *Pardes*. And I called the book *Pardes* because of the well known matter. I wrote the book regarding the mystery of the four ways pertaining to His name . And this is in reality [the meaning of] the Four that entered the *Pardes*! [...] and there I explained these matters regarding the mystery of the tales and the stories written in the Torah – *in order to teach that all of them are the eternal life and the true Torah. And there is nothing in the Torah that is not included in the mystery of the world* – which is a sample (*dugma*) from above. And everything existing and all the works which came into being in this world, came into existence in order to be in the pattern (*dugma*) of the world above..

According to this statement, the fourfold way of interpretation of Scripture serves the single aim, not to show the *differences* of the various levels of Torah, but the opposite. These four ways of interpretation of the Bible, or these four ways of speaking serve to demonstrate the *unity* within the *diversity* of biblical language – exactly like the different ways of describing the higher worlds in our *'Iyyun* -texts.

20. *JJS*, 34, 1983, p. 157.

21. Rambam, *Yad, Hilkh. Yesod. Tora*, IV, 13.

22. *Qobez al Yad*, 5; and *Hiqre Kabbala u-Sheluhoteha*. Jerusalem, 1981/2, p. 56.

The interpretation of Scripture in the fourfold way seems therefore to be a way to the *Pardes* – it is a mystical discipline, and might be, even a theurgical one.

The application of interpretation of holy traditions as a mystical way we meet again in Abraham Abulafia (as Moshe Idel has demonstrated).²³ But as compared to him, the *Iyyun* texts are still in an embryonic state in this respect.

Now, it would help to complete my argument, if there would be any statement in the *Iyyun* texts themselves, stating expressly that the speculative combination of the diverse Divine potencies is indeed a kind of journey to the mystical *Pardes*. And indeed there is a statement to this effect in the small booklet called *Sod Yeziat ha-Mezi'ut*. At the end of this document we read the following promise²⁴ :

And the one who knows this power (*koah*) will become strong in the fear of Heaven and he will ascend in his intellectual qualities... and everybody who is granted this degree must keep it deep in the secret chambers of his heart, because it is like a garment! [...]

And this man will change in his nature and he will raise above and he will be near to the attributes of High and he will clothe himself with the Holy Spirit [...]

For the essence of the matter...is that man gets knowledge about every power and power, the first and the last one, about the way how they emanate, the one from the other, and how many powers emanate from them, so that he may be able to measure (*sh'r*) every power and power and to combine (*zrf*) them, to calculate (*hshv*) them and arrange them orderly (*tkn*) as *unified* [powers].

Concluding, we may therefore say: the mystical science described here, is the active handling of these divine powers by means of the exegetical modes typical for our texts, with the aim to demonstrate that they are united and one. A method comparable to Moshe de Leon's *Pardes*-method. And by using these methods, man himself undergoes a mystical transformation. The somewhat strange use of the different terms and phrases in the *'Iyyun* texts, wandering from place to place without a recognizable philosophic system could thus be explained as having developed out of the mystical practice, aiming by these means for mystical experiences.

23. *Language, Torah and Hermeneutics in Abraham Abulafia*, Albany, 1989.

24. Ms. Paris 843, p. 21; cf. the list in Verman, *op. cit.*, p. 247.

In Lurianic Kabbalah, finally, we meet a full developed concept of *PaRDeS* as a means to mystical perfection²⁵ :

You should know that every man is obliged to occupy himself with Torah in the four levels whose sign is *PaRDeS*, namely *Peshat*, *Remez*, *Derash* and *Sod*. And he must transmigrate until he accomplishes them.

25. *Sha'ar ha-Gilgulim*, chap. 16. 17, *Sidrat Kitve Rabbenu ha-Ari*, Tel-Aviv, 1962/3.