

Mystical Vistas



The Intriguing World of Moshe Idel: An Interview



Moshe Idel, a senior fellow of the Shalom Hartman Institute and Max Cooper Professor of Jewish Thought at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, is widely regarded as the most important scholar of Jewish mysticism since Gershom Scholem. For more than three decades, in dozens of books and countless articles, he has rewritten the history of Kabbalah, applying a bold variety of interpretive methodologies.

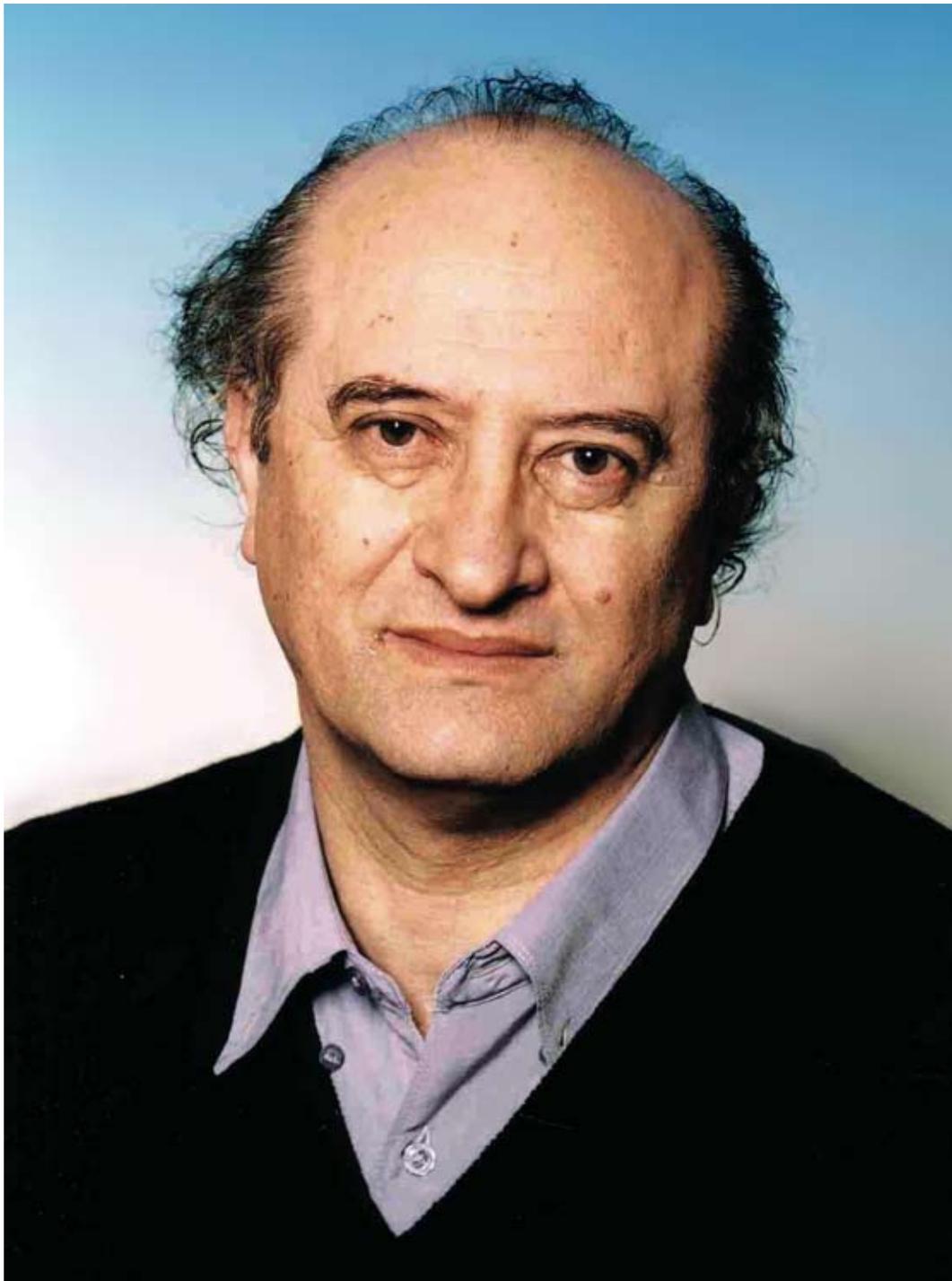


Photo of Moshe Idel
by Hezi Hojesta.
Courtesy of the
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In 1999, Idel was awarded the Israel Prize, the nation's top honor, in the field of Jewish thought. He has also received honorary doctorates from several universities, including Yale in 2006. Among his most important works are *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (1988), *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic* (1995), *Messianic Mystics* (1998), *Absorbing Perfections: Kabbalah and Interpretation* (2002), *Kabbalah and Eros* (2005), *Enchanted Chains: Techniques and Rituals in Jewish Mysticism* (2005), and *Ben: Sonship and Jewish Mysticism* (2008).

His forthcoming book is *Old Worlds, New Mirrors: On Jewish Mysticism and Twentieth Century Thought* (2009).

Renowned for his meticulous reading of texts, Idel has reinterpreted Jewish mystical sources and discovered many new ones. His prodigious oeuvre has enhanced the global reach of Jewish studies, influencing scholars of religion, philosophy and literary theory, Jewish and non-Jewish alike. In an interview with *Havruta*, Idel offers personal reflections on his life and his evolving work.

Q You were born in Romania, and you came to Israel in 1963 at the age of 16. How many languages did you know then?

A Not too many. Romanian, Yiddish, French, Russian, Latin.

Q Not Hebrew?

A I knew how to *daven* in the synagogue. I studied in *heder*, but after two years it was closed, because the schoolteacher died, the *melamed*, but also because of Communism. I had a traditional background, but I can't say I knew Hebrew well, although my father, who was in the shoe business, made many efforts to find me a tutor. I learned Hebrew in an *ulpan* for immigrants, after I got to Israel. We lived in a *shtetl*, a market town called Târgu Neamț. All the Jews spoke Yiddish, and were more or less traditional. There were a few people in the *shtetl* who knew Hebrew and studied Talmud. I was not part of this group: they didn't want to accept me, since I didn't wear a *yarmulke* regularly. It was a pity. I was actually interested, not because of the Talmud, but because I read a book about the Dead Sea Scrolls, translated from Russian to Romanian. It was fascinating.

Q And that book kindled your interest in Jewish mysticism?

A No, I wasn't particularly interested in Jewish mysticism. Not then, and not even later. I entered Jewish mysticism simply by accident. After we got to Israel, we lived near Haifa, in Kiryat Ata, and I did my undergraduate studies at Haifa University, in Hebrew and English literature. I wasn't too interested in this either, but as a new *oleh* I wanted to acquire a profession, to become a high school teacher. But then I became interested in Jewish philosophy, and when I came to the Hebrew University in Jerusalem I studied with Shlomo Pines, the great scholar of Maimonides. I read Gershom Scholem, but

mainly as a way of becoming acquainted with Israeli culture. I happened also to take a class in mysticism, but not because of any special interest in it. I wasn't even formally registered in the class, but the professor, Ephraim Gottlieb, said to me one day, you seem to know the answers to my questions, perhaps you want to be my research assistant. For me, this was a huge honor.

So, while I was starting my Ph.D. with Pines in Jewish philosophy, to make some money I started working for Gottlieb, reading manuscripts. This is when I first started reading manuscripts. And at a certain moment, I came across a manuscript of Avraham Abulafia on the *Guide of the Perplexed*. This was the accident. I was doing my Ph.D. on the Rambam, and came to Abulafia through the Rambam. I thought it might be a good idea for my dissertation to write about this commentary of Abulafia on Maimonides. This is how it began.

Q Did you study with Scholem?

A No. When I arrived at the Hebrew University in 1970, he had already retired. Only when I started to work on Abulafia did I call him. It was not out of some fascination with the figure of Scholem. But from the moment we met, we began to see each other regularly, maybe 50 to 100 times between 1971 and 1981. Lengthy meetings.

Q Your friend, the Yale literary critic Harold Bloom, has written, with regard to poetry, about the "anxiety of influence." Can you connect that notion with your relationship to Scholem?

A Unlike many other people, given the fact that I did not study with him, the figure of Scholem was not so authoritative for me. He was like an institution – beyond a human being – but I did not have this form of fascination and rebellion. When I entered the



Illuminated page
from Abraham
Abulafia's *Light of the
Intellect* (1285). Artist
unknown (PD art)

field, I did not think there would be any clash or difference with Scholem, because Scholem simply *was* the truth. But if you read a lot of manuscripts you see that things aren't so simple. You read the same manuscripts in a different way, or you read other manuscripts that emerge. You see things that can't be seen by someone who did not read those manuscripts. I don't believe that we had any significant divergence for the first five years. I was *tabula rasa*, absorbing everything, without even dreaming that it would be possible to have a dispute. This was beyond my horizon.

The first time it happened, I don't know when, I was reading manuscripts and I saw that not everything was working. Scholem and I discussed it in a relatively open manner. But it just happened, without any intention to diverge. So I don't see it as a form of "anxiety of influence." Certainly, without Scholem I would not have become a teacher at the Hebrew University. I came from nowhere and no one knew about me, and Scholem accepted me. He also never attempted to convince me that I was wrong. I published, during his lifetime, articles that held a different view from his, and he thought this was legitimate.

Q What would you say is the most important point of departure?

A I think that it would be a simplification to try to find one point of departure.

Q In your work, you emphasize streams, confluences of materials, which originate in antiquity and skip a period and then resurface, rather than a clear-cut historical account of the tradition. Would it be fair to call your approach pluralistic?

A This has always been my method. I have always claimed that Judaism is not a theological religion. We did not have a central authority, or one point of view, and we were tolerant and less suppressive of trends that

came in from many places. There are different trends that are equally representative of what we call Kabbalah, because there are different histories and different sources. In my book, *Messianic Mystics*, I claim that there is no such thing as one messianic idea. There is an apocalyptic idea, a mystical idea, a magical idea. From this point of view, my book *Ben* is not an exception. I believe this is the only way to really understand the history and phenomenology of Kabbalah. We cannot subsume everything into one major line, one major trend. This way of looking at things is my basic assumption.

It is not that I am pluralistic as an intellectual predilection, but it is a matter of the material coming from so many places. The Jews, including the kabbalists, were cosmopolitan. They could absorb and transform and generate a variety of material. Because the Jewish scholars were in contact with so many cultures and in contact with each other, they could transmit knowledge from one center of learning – Ashkenazi or Sephardi – to another. For sure, there are differences between Ashkenazi and Sephardi, but my basic assumption is that that there was cross-fertilization. I use the plural a lot. I believe the plural is very important.

Q Your recent book *Ben: Sonship and Jewish Mysticism* won the National Jewish Book Award for scholarship. Do you see it in some way as a culmination of many of the things you had done before?

A Yes. In my Ph.D. dissertation, I wrote a section dealing with the son of God in Avraham Abulafia. Since then, whenever I have come across something on the son of God, I have made a note. I never intended to write a book, but simply wanted to be up-to-date in this field. I did not intend to write a book on it until 2004, when I was in Paris and had a discussion with an editor. He had seen a small article I had written on this subject, and he wanted to publish it as a small book of



Illustration by N. Yedil from H.N. Bialik's *King Solomon and the Flying Cape* (1924). The Jewish National & University Library, Shapell Family Digitization Project

50 pages. So I agreed and started to work on it. I was sure that a month later I would send him these 50 pages, but it had soon grown to 100 pages. Each week I wrote to him in Paris, saying that the following week I would send it. After a couple of months it had become much longer than 100 pages, and I stopped writing him because it had become ridiculous. Soon it became 300 pages, not a full-fledged book yet, but an idea that was more than a matter of 50 pages.

At some point while working on the book, I discovered an unknown figure by the name of Rabbi Nehemiah ben Shlomo, an Ashkenazi mystic from the 13th century, who was completely marginalized in Jewish scholarship. I discovered that he wrote, anonymously, a whole body of extant literature. I wrote an article identifying his authorship of a series of anonymous manuscripts. The discovery of Rabbi Nehemiah was a clue for understanding the transmission of ancient visions of sonship, but also the rediscovery of an important historical figure who had been ignored. He represents an unknown angle of Judaism, more magical than I imagined before, much more anthropomorphic, and

much more resistant to Greek culture. So in a way, Ben was a byproduct of discovering this figure, who became very important to me in terms of the transmission of material.

Q Certainly, that is one of the central themes in the book – issues of intellectual and scholarly transmission. Metaphorically speaking, it seems to be a transmission, from father figures to son figures. It is interesting that you repeatedly refer to the figure of the Romanian-born Anglo-Jewish scholar Moses Gaster.

A Gaster was a genius. He knew dozens of languages. He read manuscripts in these languages. This led him to propose a vision of culture, which was larger than any other scholar I am acquainted with. He got a Ph.D. in linguistics at the age of 21 [in 1878, in Leipzig.] He also had a rabbinic degree. In his twenties he was already a major figure in Romania, writing in a variety of languages. He had a theory that ancient Jewish writings came from the Middle East into Eastern Europe, and gradually arrived in Western Europe. These writings, including midrashim,

were absorbed by a variety of sects in the Balkans. This was provocative, because it pointed to a Judaization of the folklore of Europe.

Q You have a more Gaster-like approach than a Scholem-like approach. Was he a role model for you?

A This is true, but it is not because I am looking for a father figure. The desire for sonship should not be applied to me. Gaster was a late discovery for me. The first article I published about him was in 2007. Here again, I discovered a figure who was neglected by modern Judaic scholarship. They neglected someone who was a real genius. He was the one who initiated the study of the Samaritans, who have lived since antiquity in the land of Israel. He corresponded with them in Hebrew. He had a private collection of thousands of manuscripts, tens of thousands of fragments of manuscripts, in 15 languages, which are now at the University of Manchester.

He was able to see a picture that no other figure in Jewish studies had seen. I showed in 2007 that in his early twenties, Gaster already had theories about the Zohar, which he had written in Romanian. These things were ignored in the scholarship of the Zohar for 40 years. It is hard to explain why. Gaster's writings were in Scholem's library, which meant that Scholem knew about them.

Q *Ben* is a very difficult book. Many readers don't know words that you use freely, such as "theophoric" and "theophanic" and "katabatic." It might be said that the book, and other works of yours, embody a fascinating tension. On the one hand, there is a great openness and pluralism, and the celebration of the loosening of authority in Jewish scholarship, yet on the other hand, you seem to be writing for an elite, highly professional readership. Do you think that your immersion in esoteric manuscripts makes you a more esoteric writer?

A It is not my goal or intention to be esoteric. I would prefer to be more lucid or exoteric. This is a problem, I agree, with all my books. The explanation for it is simple. Earlier we discussed Scholem and Pines. Neither of these men wrote books that were much easier than mine. What I mean is, they are my partners in dialogue. The ideal reader for me is not the undergraduate student, but Scholem and Pines, and now, Harold Bloom. I am reading manuscripts in a very professional manner, and attempt to make points that are more important for a scholar than for a lay reader. That is my reason. I don't purposely seek to be esoteric. But the topics that I am dealing with are very, very difficult and complicated, and if I didn't use the terminology that I use, I would have to write a book that was three or four times bigger. Let me ask you a question. Would you say the same to a mathematician who is writing a book on mathematics, full of technical terms?

Q Is it possible to summarize, for the readers of *Havruta*, what you have tried to accomplish in *Ben*?

A The book just emerged, like a golem, without any clear intention. Looking back, I can say that I myself was surprised by the richness of the category of sonship. For me, the book demonstrates that the Jewish relationship with Christianity is more complicated and variegated than, "we don't have a son, they have a son." This is a mistake that emerges from the polemics of the Middle Ages. The Jews were actually more open and more creative on this issue, and considered themselves to be sons of God. All of us know today that we are, in the language of the Bible, "sons to the Lord, your God." However, on a theoretical level, Jews have other forms of sonship, different from Christianity, rarely influenced by Christianity, and even antagonistic to Christianity, which were not explored, because people were either afraid or did not see the range and scope. But it describes a much more intimate relationship to God within Judaism.

In the book, I describe the different categories of the relationship to God, with sonship as a major clue. I don't come to invalidate Christianity, to say that they are wrong, or that we are better. However, the fact that such a category was ignored, in such a blatant manner, by all the Jewish theologians who were afraid of it, saying "that is not us, it is them" – this is interesting and significant. In fact, the ideas of sonship reflect a search by Jews, especially the mystics among them, for a special affinity with the Divine. An important point of my book is that the Jewish approach to sonship does not gravitate around one approach; there are alternatives.

Q Do you think that Zionism and independent statehood have enabled Jewish thinkers and religious thinkers to be more relaxed about Christianity, and therefore such ideas as sonship?

A We should differentiate between Zionism and the State of Israel. Gaster was vice-president of the Zionist movement, but he died in 1939, before the state was established. He did not have any complexes relating to Christianity. He was ready to say in Romania and London what he believed about Judaism. Even if he suffered – he was expelled from Romania, and could not find an academic job in England – he was not apologetic. For sure, the existence of the state is contributing something, but even before the state was created, people like Scholem also wrote in an unapologetic way. For the younger generation, of course, the burden of the tension with another religion is much smaller.

Q *Ben* is a very masculine book. Is the woman, the daughter, included in the masculine, the son? Or is this particularly about the male form of sonship?

A I hope to write a book on the emergence of femininity in Jewish thought. I have plenty of material, including discussions

about gender equality. In the case of *Ben*, the intimacy with God was through masculine approaches. The daughter was not included. She was considered totally different, and inferior to the son.

Q In today's world, Jewish mysticism is often mediated by pop culture. Do you think the vogue of popular Kabbalah is detrimental, or can it have positive aspects?

A I don't see negative aspects here. For a simple reader, those consuming popular Kabbalah, what we have is a form of leisure, as well as a search for identity. If this wasn't available, they would find something else. People need something to do in their spare time to give them relaxation, and this popular Kabbalah emerged. Yes, there are exaggerations and exploitations. This is negative, and found in any cult. But in itself, the phenomenon is neither positive nor negative.

Q Your forthcoming book, *Old Worlds, New Mirrors: On Jewish Mysticism and Twentieth-Century Thought*, deals with such diverse Jewish thinkers as Franz Kafka, Walter Benjamin and Jacques Derrida, as well as Abraham Joshua Heschel and Gershom Scholem. Do you believe that Jewish mysticism has re-emerged as a central element of Jewish thought, secular as well as religious?

A Definitely yes, though only in a fragmented, and sometimes veiled, manner. The vast kabbalistic and Hasidic literature inspired 20th-century thinkers who are normally identified with non-mystical Judaism or even atheistic Judaism. Elements of mystical literature found their way to these thinkers, especially via the writings of Martin Buber, Scholem and Heschel, and fertilized Jewish and sometimes even non-Jewish thought.