

THE NAME OF GOD
AND THE LINGUISTIC
THEORY OF THE KABBALA

I

"Thy word (or: essence) is true from the beginning"; thus reads the Psalmist's passage, oft quoted in kabbalistic literature (Psalm 119: 160). According to the originally conceived Judaistic meaning, truth was the word of God which was audible both acoustically and linguistically.* Under the system of the synagogue, revelation is an acoustic process, not a visual one; or revelation at least ensues from an area which is metaphysically associated with the acoustic and the perceptible (in a sensual context). This is repeatedly emphasised with reference to the

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words of the Torah (Deuteronomy 4: 12): "Ye heard the voice of the words, but saw no similitude; only ye heard a voice." What precisely we are to understand by this voice and what is uttered through it is the very question which the various currents of Judaistic religious thought have constantly posed themselves. The indissoluble link between the idea of the revealed truth and the notion of language—is as much, that is, as the word of God makes itself heard through the medium of human language, if, otherwise, human experience can reach the knowledge of such a word at all—is presumably one of the most important, if not the most important, legacies bequeathed by Judaism to the history of religions.

It will not, however, be possible, within the framework made available to us here, to investigate the full breadth and depth of the terms of this question. In this respect we must look in to the literature and thought of the various Jewish mystics, in order to discover what they can teach us about this problem.

The point of departure of all mystical linguistic theories, among which we should also number those of the Kabbalists, is constituted by the conviction that the language—the medium—in which the spiritual life of man is accomplished, or consummated, includes an inner property, an aspect which does not altogether merge or disappear in the relationships of communication between men. Man passes on information, man tries to render himself comprehensible to other men, but in all such attempts there is something else vibrating, which is not merely communication, meaning and expression. The sound upon which all language is built, and the voice which gives form to the language, forges it out from the matter of sound; these are already, *prima facie* beyond our understanding. The age-old question, which has divided the philosophical camp since the time of Plato and Aristotle, namely whether language relies on tradition, agreement or on some inner property within the being itself, has, from time immemorial, been dealt with in the light of this latent complexity of the undecipherable character of language.

However, if language is something more than communication and expression, which are the bases of any linguistic research, and when this sensual element, from whose fullness

and profundity it is generated, also contains that other feature, which I earlier called its inner property, then the subsequent question is raised: what exactly is this "secret" or "hidden" dimension of language, about whose existence all mystics for all time feel unanimous agreement, from India and the mystics of Islam right up to the Kabbalists and Jacob Boehme? The answer is, with virtually no trace of hesitation, the following: it is the symbolic nature of language which defines this dimension. The linguistic theories of mystics frequently diverge when it comes to determining this symbolic nature. But all mystics in quest of the secret of language come to share a common basis, namely the fact that language is used to communicate something which goes way beyond the sphere which allows for expression and formation; the fact, also, that a certain inexpressible something, which only manifests itself in symbols, resonates in every manner of expression; that this something is fundamental to every manner of expression, and, if I may say so, flashes through the chinks which exist in the universal structure of expression. This conviction is at the same time the common basis and the experience from which it has nourished and revitalised itself in every generation, our own included. The mystic discovers in language a quality of dignity, a dimension inherent to itself, as one might phrase it at the present time: something pertaining to its structure which is not adjusted to a communication of what is communicable, but rather—and all symbolism is founded on this paradox—to a communication of what is non-communicable, of that which exists within it for which there is no expression; and even if it could be expressed, it would in no way have any meaning, or any communicable sense.

But at this point we are encroaching on the religious domain—which is certainly not the only domain which can harbour symbolism, as is demonstrated already by every theory of aesthetics which is debatable to a greater or lesser degree—and the respective content of 'the language of God, considered as that area which is most closely associated with the secret dimension of language that is mentioned above. In this area the original concern of mystics was that they departed from the language used by mortal men, in order to discover within it the language of revelation, or even discover language *as* revelation. Constantly

they would worry and brood over the question: how is it possible that the language of the gods, or the language of God, infiltrates the spoken language and because of this infiltration lays itself open to discovery. From time immemorial they have sensed an abyss, a depth in language which they have set themselves the task of measuring, exploring and consequently conquering and mastering. This is the point from which the mystical linguistic theories of all religions issue, the point at which language should be at once language of revelation and language of human reason. This is the fundamental thesis of linguistic mysticism, as is indicated by Johann Georg Hamann with masterly laconicism; "Language—mother of reason and revelation, their α (alpha) and ω (omega)."¹

If our intention in the following pages is to attempt to say something which will contribute to an understanding of the conception of language maintained by the Kabbalists, this is primarily for the reason that their superabundantly positive delineation of language, as the "mystery revealed" of all things that exist, made it possible to establish this as the most highly instructive paradigm of a mystical theory of language.

There are essentially three themes attaching to an argument such as this which consistently occupy the foremost position, in their various aspects:

1) The conception that creation and revelation are both principally and essentially auto-representations of God himself, in which, as a consequence and in accordance with the infinite nature of the divinity, certain instants of the divine are introduced, which can only be communicated in terms of symbols in the finite and determined realm of all that is created.² A directly associated

¹ In a letter from Hamann to Jacobi written at the end of 1785, shortly before his death, cf. *Hamanns Schriften*, ed. Gildemeister 5, p. 122, and Rudolf Unger, *Hamanns Sprachtheorie im Zusammenhange seines Denkens*, 1905, p. 226, in which the author completely misconstrues the importance of this epigram for Hamann's thought.

² Molitor, *Philosophie der Geschichte oder über die Tradition*, 2, 1834, pp. 73 & 248. The author is of the opinion that he has discovered in the Kabbala another conception of the Creation which is seen not as the auto-representation of God, but as the shadow projected by God. However, he has misunderstood his sources for this thesis in the *Emek ha-Melekh*, folio 12b, para. 61, where the argument has nothing to do with this. In kabbalistic literature I have only once come across the conception of nature as the

factor with this is the further conception that language is the essence of the universe.

2) The central standpoint of the name of God as the metaphysical origin of all language, and the conception of language as the explanation—by dismantling—of this name, such as *it* appears principally in the documents relating to Revelation, but also in all language in general. The language of God, which is crystallised in the name of God and, in the last analysis, in the one single name itself, which is its center, is the basis of all spoken language, in which it is reflected and symbolically manifest.

3) The dialectical relation between magic and mystique in the theory of the names of God, as well as in the extraordinary power which is attributed to and recognised in the simple human word.

But before I deal with the various perceptions of the Kabbalists, I feel that I should make one observation at this stage, in order to avoid misunderstandings. Seen as an historical document, the Hebrew Bible contains no magic concept of the name of God. Of course, the passage of the Torah (Exod. 3: 6-14), which relates the revelation of the name of God, YHVH, by the burning bush (and about which a plethora of exegeses has been written), is written in an extremely emphatic manner; but even here, and still more so in the numerous other passages which contain references to the invocation of the name of God, the magic aspect is conspicuously absent. The fact that this aspect was at a later time introduced into the text, reveals the history of the influence of the Bible, and, in this respect, is relevant and of interest to our exposition. The name which is explained to Moses by the burning bush is nevertheless not even directly designated as the Tetragram, although its etymology" does imply some reference to it: "I shall be who I shall be." If this explanation, which is certainly not intended to be a philosophical one, is to be understood in the sense of the Torah, it would seem to express rather the freedom of God, who will be there, present and existent, for Israel, whatever form or manifestation

shadow projected by the divine name, and this again in the light of the mystique of language. I found this in the manuscript commentary on the Psalms, namely the *Kaph ha-Ketoreth*, which was printed c. 1500 in Paris.

this presence or existence might take. But the name so defined lacks, as we have said, the aura of magic, which the Torah strives to remove as far as possible not only from this name, but from the word in general.

To quote Benno Jacob, an eminent scholar in this domain:³ "It is in fact most striking, in relation to the decisively sacramental (one is presumably to understand: sacral) meaning which the *word* has in the contemporary camp of heathendom, that it at no juncture plays any role whatsoever in Israelite religion, and more specifically in the ritual of this religion. The silence is so complete that it can only be interpreted as willful. In the exercise of all his devotional duties, the Israelite priest is totally *mute*, with the exception of the blessing which he has to utter (Num. 6:24) and which (by virtue of its wording) is not only protected from any misunderstanding, but also expressly guaranteed against any kind of mistaken interpretation.' Not one single word is prescribed for the priest to speak in any of his duties. He carries out his functions and sacrificial deeds without a word. He is instructed so fastidiously in the ritual to be observed in the service of the day of atonement, that not one definite word comes to our ears, because he has no such word to pronounce.. The rites which he must observe with regard to a leper are so precisely laid down, that there is no whisper of any pertinent formula. The agenda: ritual of the Israelite priest in effect only consists of *agenda*, i.e. acts. If we weigh up the other similarity between the Israelite cult and the cult of other ancient religions, this silence can only amount to conscious opposition. Every and any indication that the word is imbued through itself with some force, and that the prescribed formula operates with a magic effect, should be avoided at all costs."

This extremely pertinent observation is not contradicted by the stipulation that, in prayer or any specific procedures associated with prayer, the name of God is 'invoked,' because this invocation is in point of fact separate from the actual ritual itself, in as far as it is carried out by priests. In this respect, however, one should not exclude the fact that the magic note again crops up here. In striking contrast to the quotation used

³ Benno Jacob, *Im Namen Gottes. Eine sprachliche und religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung zum Alten und Neuen Testament*, 1903, p. 64.

above, a contemporary scholar has this to say about the invocation of the name YHVH: "In a theological sense, it occupies the position which is taken up in other cults by the cultural image. It was surrounded by a whole apparatus of not uncomplicated cultural representations, rites and provisions, in order to protect the knowledge one might have about it, but above all the use which Israel was permitted to make of it. With a reality of such a holy order entrusted to it, Israel found itself confronted with an enormous task, which consisted not least of all in the resistance of all the temptations which arose, both simultaneously and implicitly."⁴ This is the meaning of the biblical mention of the "sanctification of the name." It is quite conceivable, and has been the subject of many considerations,⁵ that even in Israel one was in those times likely to make use of this name in the course of certain mysterious and magic practices which constituted a real danger for those concerned. The text of the Bible, however, gives us no direct evidence of this, and this would seem quite significant.

Among historians of religion there is a widespread conception that the magic quality of the name relies on the fact that a close and substantial relation exists between the name and the name's bearer. The name is a real, non-fictitious quantity. It contains a declaration about the nature of its bearer or at least something of the potency attaching to it;⁶ it is, further, identified with the nature and essence of what is named by it—a viewpoint which played an important role in the oriental world which surrounded Judaism, and which found specific emphasis in Egyptian religion. But one is nevertheless permitted to remark that the magic of the word is a far deeper and more far-reaching fundamental experience for man—an experience which has simply undergone a particularly acute concentration in the magic of the name. The fact that words have an effect which greatly surpasses all "understanding" needs no supporting reference from religious speculation: the experiences of poets, mystics and anyone else represent very fully the sensual properties of the word. The issue, first and foremost, of this experience is the conception

⁴ Gerhard von Rad, *Theologie des Alten Testaments* 1, 1957, p. 185.

⁵ E.g. by S. Mowinckel, *Psalmstudien*, I, 1921, pp. 50 ff.

⁶ von Rad, p. 183.

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of the power of names and their potential employment in magic practices. It is consequently not surprising that, in the course of the historical development of Judaism, this magic has had some effect on authorities on the Scriptures and apocalyptic writers, and that this has been due to external influences no less than to inner pressures.⁷ Even when it was not endowed with magic accents it was able to make itself at home in the biblical concept of the vast might which inhabits the name of God. There were in fact sufficient passages in the holy scriptures—the clearest probably being in Deuteronomy—in which, precisely, a divergence was drawn up between God himself, persisting in his transcendency, and his name, which is present in the temple, with the result that the name itself is akin to a quintessence of the sacred, that is, completely intangible. It is an esoteric configuration, effective within creation, of power, namely the omnipotence of God. The absolute awe which encircles everything which attaches to this name and its manifestation determines everything which authorities on the Scriptures and teachers of the Talmud are attempting to establish about it in terms of definitions or assertions. "Heaven and earth are perishable, but 'Thy great name liveth and endureth in eternity'. The name had to be written together with godliness. The woman suspected of infidelity was duly informed that she was not to bring about the effacement of the great name written in godliness (in accordance with the stipulation in Num. 5). Whoever writes down a divine name may not even reply to a monarch who is addressing him a greeting before he has finished writing the name. And it is not just complete divine names which are not to be effaced; this stipulation applies to individual letters in a divine name. Moses only allowed himself to mention the Tetragram after the 21st word. In the case of sacrifices this divine name is used exclusively, in order to afford the sectarians no pretext (to parade their gnostic speculations). The Tetragram and all its transcriptions were placed in the Ark of the Covenant."⁸

⁷ Jacob, p. 110, concerning the way in which these ideas penetrate Pharisaical Judaism.

⁸ Ludwig Blau, *Das altjüdische Zauberwesen*, 1898, p. 119-120, in which the source data for these assertions are also given. Some of these assertions have been recently examined in a philosophical spirit by Emanuel Levinas,

The most significant moment in this development and at the same time the most paradoxical moment is the fact that the name, by which God calls himself and which is used to utter invocations, withdraws from the acoustic sphere and becomes unpronounceable. To begin with it is tolerated for a few especially rare occasions within the temple as a word which may be pronounced, for example when the priest gives the blessing or on the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur); after this, however, and above all after the destruction of the temple, it was completely withdrawn into the realm of the ineffable. It is precisely this ineffability, with which the name of God can, it is true, be addressed but no longer expressed, which has, in terms of the Jewish sensitivity, endowed it with that inexhaustible depth, evidence of which is available even from such & radical exponent of theistic rationalism as Hermann Cohen in a stirring passage speaking of the Messianic promise (Zechariah 14:9): "In that day shall there be one Lord, and his name one" (a sentence which forms the conclusion of the prayer of the Jewish liturgy which is repeated three times daily), he says that it is in no way comprehensible that the name should be so emphasized, in the way which emerges from the translation. "The word *shem*, however, contains an inexhaustible force of expression in the religious sensitivity of the Jew. The name of God is no longer a magic word, as it once was, but it is the magic word which attaches to the Messianic faith ... The name itself will one day announce the one-ness of God; there will be evidence of this in all languages, and in all peoples. 'A day shall come when I will transform the language of all peoples into a clearer language, so that they will invoke the name of God all together.' This is the original Messianic meaning of the divine name."⁹ The historian of religion may justifiably doubt the fact that it is the original Messianic meaning of the divine name; but it is beyond any doubt, in this passage, that Cohen speaks as the pure Utopian which he was when he expresses the attitude of the

Le Nom de Dieu d'après quelques textes talmudiques, in the colloquium: *L'Analyse du langage théologique*. (*Le Nom de Dieu*, ed. E. Castelli, Paris, 1969, pp. 155-167).

⁹ Hermann Cohen, *Jüdische Schriften I*, 1924, p. 63. This passage is taken from one of Cohen's late writings.

devout and godly man confronted with the unfathomable depth of the divine name.

II

Even before speculation about language really got under way among the esotericists of Judaism, the name of God was central to their area of interest. From the second century A.D. onwards, at the very latest, the Tetragram, which in the meantime had become ineffable, was labelled with a term which at once contains within itself the possible contradictions in the conception of its meaning and its function. The name of God is in fact designated as the *shem ha-meforash*, which is in no way an unequivocal meaning, but rather a meaning which scintillates with differing and self-contradictory meanings. The passive participle *meforash* can in effect mean "made known" as well as "explicitly explained" or directly—that is, in accordance with its letters—"pronounced." On the other hand it can also signify "separate" and even "hidden" in this context; what is more, for all these interpretations one can make reference to thoroughly convincing proof contained in the usual terminology of Hebrew and Aramaic sources of the early centuries.¹⁰ The fact that it is one and the same term which on the one hand designates the formal name and on the other hand the mysterious and hidden name does not constitute the least evident paradox of religious terminology. But whatever the original meaning might have been, there was, in the course of time, a tendency to shift the emphasis to the second category of meaning, in which this term designates the secret name which is an extraction of all explicit designation and therefore of explanation. This is the imperative consequence of the fact that, from the 2nd or 3rd century onwards,

¹⁰ The literature relevant to the *Shem meforash* is abundant. I shall limit myself to an indication of the wholly opposed conceptions of Ludwig Blau, in the above-mentioned book, pp. 123-126, and Max Gruenbaum, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Sprach- und Sagenkunde*, 1901, pp. 228-434. The Kabbalists considered both these conceptions of the *meforash* as legitimate. (cf. for example, Moses Cordovero, *Pardes rimonim*, chap. 19, para. 1.)

¹¹ The fact that this linguistic tradition dates back so far is a result of its being misconstrued, due to translation, as far back as the Coptic-gnostic scripts. Cf. my own explanations in the *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*, 30, 1931, pp. 170-176. Reference is also often made to this linguistic tradition in the writings of the mystique of the *Merkaba* between the 3rd and 7th centuries.

at the very latest, purely mystical divine names, which rely on an accumulation of letters, and which are taken from certain verses of the Bible or else by means of other processes which we cannot fathom, are also and likewise qualified as *Shem meforash*.

The fact that there did exist such purely mystical divine names in the tradition of strictly rabbinical Judaism, and not only in the writings of the Magi and the Theurgists of the same period, is unequivocally proven by the evidence given by Talmudic and Midrashic literature. The argument here also centers around the names of God, which are composed of 12, 42 and 72 letters, and to which especial meaning or functions were attributed.¹² Nowhere are we told in what way it bears any approximate relation with the Tetragram. This is particularly striking in as much as the great and mighty name of God is the topic of treatment very early on in literature; it is this name which brought about the creation, or rather the creation is closely affixed to the Name —'i.e., the creation is contained within its limits by the name. But it is far from certain, in all cases, whether the Tetragram is implicitly connected here. In the tradition of the great scholastic leaders of the early Middle Ages the 42-lettered name of God, which has absolutely no visible connection with the Tetragram, is designated as that name which played an active part in the creation.¹³ A long time before any Talmudic Aggadah says that the "bottomless abyss" of all creation is sealed in the name,¹⁴ we can read virtually analogous assertions in apocryphal writings of the pre-Christian era. In the "Book of Jubilees" (36:7) Isaac implores his sons to fear God and to serve him "by the glorified, honoured, sublime and almighty name, which made heaven and earth and all things together." In another apocryphal writing of the same period, the "Prayer of Manasses," it is said that God has closed the abyss and sealed it with his mighty and exalted name.¹⁵ In addition, certain versions

¹² Blau, pp. 137-146. In the magic papyri and later on in the kabbalistic tradition there is even a divine name of a hundred letters. Cf. Bakhya ben Asher's Commentary on the Torah, ex. 3:4, in which this name is related back to the tradition of the Babylonian scholars of the Gaonic period.

¹³ For example in Hay Gaon and Rashi, cf. Blau, p. 125 and p. 132.

¹⁴ In *Makkoth* 11a.

¹⁵ Riesser, *Altjüdisches Schrifttum ausserhalb der Bibel*, 1928, p. 346.

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of the Great Hekhalòth, an essential mystical text of the Merkaba, mention this sealing of heaven and earth and the sealing of the name by which they were created.¹⁶

If the argument in the passages mentioned here deals with the name of God as the *agens* of the creation, the reason for this is still the magic conception of the might of the name, basically speaking; and the fact that this might has once again been effective. The name is a concentration of divine power, and in accordance with the different combination of these powers concentrated at this point, the various names can fulfill different functions. The creative *word* of God, which evokes heaven and earth, and which is substantiated in evidence by the account of the Creation in Genesis as well as elsewhere in the Psalms—"By the word of the Lord were the heavens made" (Psalm 33: 6)—is certainly not the same as the name of God for the biblical authors. The fact that it became the word points to a significant transformation. From the coincidence of word and name two important consequences emerged which were instrumental for the development of the mystique of language in Judaism. On the one hand, by virtue of this identification, the word which communicates something, even if the communication takes the form of an imperative ("Let there be light!"), the word which imparts information of some kind becomes a name which issues no information save itself. What emerges from this is no more than the manifestation of that which was previously present in God himself, in the infinite fullness of his being and almighty power. In this context the Midrash tells how, *before* the Creation, God and his name existed alone.¹⁷ When the name becomes word, it becomes an essential part of what we may call the language of God, the language in which God, as it were, represents and manifests himself, just as he communicates with his creation, which by the medium of this language comes into being itself. This dual character of the divine word as a name as well determines the linguistic doctrine of the Kabbalists to a considerable extent. In another way, however, this identification leads to a further conception of the elements of the

¹⁶ For example in the Wertheimer version, chap. 23, para. 2, as well as in Jeilinek's version, chap. 9.

¹⁷ *Pirkei Rabbi Eli'ezer*, chap. 3.

name and the word—a conception which accordingly differs from that under which the letters appear (or, for a Jew whose thought is formed by the Hebrew and Aramaic, letters would more precisely be called: consonants). The letters of the divine language are what lie at the basis of all creation by way of their combination. These letters, however, are those of the Hebrew language, seen as the original language and the language of revelation. This was the real starting point of the speculation about linguistic mystique, and this is what we shall proceed to examine.

In the Talmud this conception found its outcome in a much quoted sentence of one of the most notable esotericists of the 3rd century: "Bezalel (the builder of the Tabernacle) knew how to put together the letters, from which heaven and earth were created."¹⁸ The tabernacle is made in the image of the cosmos,¹⁹ and the builder of the tabernacle must therefore have possessed some of the secret knowledge about how the cosmos is arranged and works. By means of divine enlightenment he was imbued with a certain knowledge which enabled him to reconstruct as an image the work of the creation within a finite cadre. One can presume that among these letters those of the divine name are to be understood, although it might also be conceivable that in an extended sense a combination of the alphabet is intended, thus a broader notion. The creative force which resides in words and names, that quality of immediate and direct effect—in other words, their magic property—is thus referred back to the fundamental elements in which, for the mystic, the image of sound and the written image coincide reciprocally. We shall have to return to this connection at a later stage.

The fact that, in this area of thought, the divine breath which turns the creature man into the living being according to the account in the book of Genesis, and further reveals to man his possibility of speech, is testified to by a text of not inconsiderable weight. The so ito speak official Aramaic translation of the Torah, which was used in divine service in the synagogue, the

¹⁸ *Berakhoth* 55a.

¹⁹ *Midrash Tadsche*, chap. 2: "The Tabernacle was built in accordance with the creation of the world." This *midrash* is also to be found in *Bamidbar Rabba*, chap. XIII.

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Targum Onkelos, renders the sentence in Genesis 2:7 "...and man became a living soul" as "...man became a spirit endowed with speech." Thus it is precisely language which makes of man a living being. But those minds with an inclination towards speculation associated with this a further question before long: must this linguistic element not have already been contained in the breath of God?

This leads us to the first text of Jewish literature, which yields the key words of the kabbalistic mystique of 'language and which is at the same time the most ancient text having a speculative character which is available to us in the Hebrew language. This is the *Sefer Yetsira*, "The Book of the Creation" (one could also translate this more expressively by "The Book of the Formation"); scholars differ in their dating of this book between the 2nd century and the 5th or 6th centuries; I myself am inclined to adhere to the earlier dating in the 2nd or 3rd centuries.²⁰ This is a slender work of only a few pages; it is written in a Hebrew which is solemn and deliberate, and at the same time often extremely laconic. At a much later date, in the early Middle Ages, it served philosophers and mystics alike, as well as Kabbalists, as an authority which they borrowed to uphold their various personal viewpoints in their numerous commentaries. It contains a considerable number of enigmatic sentences, although its basic thesis is reasonably self-evident, precisely in the points which concern us here. It sets forth the ancient speculations, which recur right up to the close of the late biblical era, about the divine figure of *Sophia* considered as divine Wisdom, in which all creation is grounded; but it also lends these speculations a new twist, by suggesting that the mystique of numbers and the mystique of words are juxtaposed without any real link between them.

By means of the 32 "wonderful paths of Wisdom" God created all things. These paths consist of the 10 original numbers, which are called *Sefiroth* here and which are the fundamental force of the order of the creation, and the 22 letters, that is, consonants, which are the elements which lie at the basis of

²⁰ Cfr. my explanations of the Book of Yetsira in *Ursprung und Anfänge der Kabbala*, 1962, pp. 20-28.

everything created.²¹ The manner in which the numbers establish their relation with the letters is an enigma, and the author will pass over it in virtual silence. He deals with both phenomena individually, without establishing between them any association at the level of detail. Such an association occurs at only two places.²² In one instance, in respect of the second original number or Sefira, which is defined as the Pneuma, it is said that God engraved and chiselled out the 22 "fundamental letters" in this place. But this Pneuma is already the first organic element: air. On the contrary, the first Sefira, which is designated as that divine Pneuma, Ruakh Elohim, and which is mentioned in the Book of Genesis 1:2, has, for this author, no relation to the linguistic elements, as one might actually expect. Furthermore, this author has not yet gone quite as far in his own concept of the mystique of language as have the Kabbalists in his footsteps. This is all the more noteworthy as the point had almost been reached when the divine Pneuma and the breath of God, which, according to the above-mentioned Aramaic paraphrase in the book of Genesis, awakened in man the power of the word, could be brought into association with each other. In another passage it is said that the original numbers 5 to 10 correspond to the six directions of space, measured out by God and sealed by Him with the six permutations of the three consonants J, H and V. These three signs, however, in Hebrew script, also stand for the three vowels I, A and O, and constitute the magic syllable *jao* as well as the name *Jaho*. Both these play an extraordinary role in all Jewish-influenced magic practices dating back to late antiquity.²³ These three consonants—one of which is repeated—are those which form the Tetragram. The elements of the actual name of God are also the seals which are affixed to the creation and which protect it from breaking asunder.

The 22 letters, from which every created thing is composed,

²¹ The Book of Yetsira has frequently been translated into European languages. As a result of the considerable complexities presented by certain passages, such translations are frequently at variance with each other. Chapter I deals with the ten *sefiroth*, chapters 2-5 the letters.

²² Both these passages are to be found in chapter 1 about the *sefiroth*, paras. 10 and 13.

²³ Cf. *Ursprung und Anfänge der Kabbala*, p. 27.

are undoubtedly part and parcel of the 32 paths of *Sophia*. But there is no apparent explanation as to why these paths were themselves created, since in this instance *Sophia* appears rather to be an uncreated force which was to be found within God from time immemorial. In this book, however, the borderlines between a created thing and an uncreated thing are to 'some extent softened. If one adheres to the normal linguistic usage in the last paragraph of the first chapter, which utilises certain fixed formulae which correspond to the initial stages of the Creation, the impression gained in any event is that these letters exist before the *Tohu vahohu* (=chaos), before the throne which embodies the divine Glory and before the beings which inhabited the world of the Merkaba (= the divine chariot). They are the organs by means of which all further creation can be effected, the organs which God availed himself of, as can be seen from various other indications in the book. Nevertheless, it is not said that they are the elements of a divine word or of divine utterance; this point is in no instance the evident subject of the argument here. In the process of the Creation, God manipulated these letters in accordance with determined procedures: he engraved them in the Pneuma—the Hebrew word *ruakh* means both air and spirit—he chiselled them out of the Pneuma, weighed them, exchanged them and combined them, and finally formed out of them the soul; here this would mean the essence of everything created and everything to be created at some future time. They pass through the stages of the voice, the Pneuma and articulate speech; they are then "fixed" in this articulate form in the five organs of the mouth: the throat, the palate, the tongue, the teeth and the lips. They therefore appear here as essentially human linguistic elements. But no sooner has this determination been made than their cosmic signification is brought into prominence. They are attached to the sphere (although it is not quite clear to which sphere, but one can presume it to be the celestial sphere) in such a way that when two concentric circles, for example, which both at some point contain these elements, turn in opposite ways, then the 231

²⁴ For example in the Commentary of the Azriel from Gerona, which is printed in the editions of the book of Yetsira under the name of the Nakhmanides.

combinations which are possible from 22 elements emerge in the movement of these circles. But these 231 combinations are the "doors" through which every created thing will pass. Every facet of reality is grounded in these original combinations, by means of which God brought into being the oral movement. The alphabet is the original source of language and at the same time the original source of being. "Thus it is that all creation and all speech are born of one name." What is to be understood by this name? Can it be the Tetragram, the letters of which are linked with the 231 combinations, as is supposed by several kabbalistic commentators? Can it be the alphabetic series itself, which is to be designated as being this mystical name—a conception for which there are not a few parallels in Greek and Latin sources?²⁵ Or might one possibly disregard the precise interpretation of the word *shem*, that is, "name," and allow the argument to proceed with the focus on a scheme or method, by means of which the formation of words is effected?²⁶ The text does not permit any definite answer to be made to these questions. It is nonetheless clear that the author had in mind a conception of the Hebrew language, according to which the roots of the words would not, as claimed by all later grammarians, be drawn from three consonants, but only two; further, this third radical would be to some extent an extension and supplementary movement of the alphabet. This point of view was shared, before the emergence of the so-called establishment of Hebrew grammar, by the most ancient hymnologists of synagogical poetry, who wrote in much the same way as the author of the Book of Yetsira in Palestine.

Every facet of reality which exists beyond the divine Pneuma thus contains linguistic elements; and the clear opinion of the author is that every created thing has a linguistic essence which consists in any conceivable combination of these fundamental letters. Over and above he allots to the individual letters not only predetermined functions, but also objects, such as the

²⁵ Cf. the material of Franz Dornseiff, *Das Alphabet in Mystik und Magie*, 1925, pp. 69-80, as well as my own observation in *op. cit.* p. 25, where I have interpreted an ancient Graeco-Hebrew amulet in which the alphabetical series is clearly used for a magic purpose.

²⁶ For example in Erich Bischoff, *Elemente der Kabbala*, Part I, 1913, p. 67.

planets, the signs of the Zodiac in the sky, the days of the week, the months of the year, and the principal organs of the human body. Macrocosm and microcosm are also clearly inter-connected in their linguistic essence, and each and every sphere of the Creation breathes the same linguistic spirit which, in the holy language, has fashioned itself in manners of expression which we can grasp ourselves. It becomes self-evident that this conception of the essence of the Creation is closely linked with the linguistic conception of magic. And in fact the viewpoint that the Book of Yetsira pursued not only theoretical designs but was also possibly destined to thaumaturgical practices can in no way be dismissed as absurd, as, on other occasions, I have tried to show by analysis of the notion of the creation of Golem.²⁷

This connection between magic and mystic conceptions and more specifically the transition from one to the other is demonstrated in addition from another angle in the esoteric tradition of Judaism. The use of the Torah for magic purposes, which is certainly very far removed from its originally conceived design, was to make its appearance in Hellenistic times. In any event, for the period in which the Book of Yetsira came into being, it is revealed in the obscure papyrus scripts which were not satisfied with the five books of Moses and their mantic usage,²⁸ but conceived of a sixth or seventh book of Moses which could be taken as a purely magical manual. The Hebrew literature of this period which deals with the mystique of the Merkaba is filled with such mystical divine names, whose etymology is rarely clear and recognisable. And it is difficult to draw a clear line of demarcation between such texts and purely magical works, such as the very recently published *Sefer ha-razim*, which is an angelological system with magic applications.²⁹ Divine names, which bear some relation to any specific aspect of the manifestation of God—even if this relation is not really apparent—and names of angels intermingle here as they do in the obscure papyrus scripts. It is often hard for us to understand the methods

²⁷ In my book *Zur Kabbala und ihrer Symbolik*, 1960, pp. 209-219.

²⁸ Cf. Max Grunwald, *Biblioimantie*, in the *Mitteilungen für jüdische Volkskunde*, Book 10, 1902, pp. 80-98.

²⁹ *Sepher Ha-Ratsim, a newly recovered book of magic from the Talmudic period*, ed. Mordecai Margalioth, 1966.

by which such mysterious names were extracted from the Torah. We do however have access to Hebrew and Aramaic texts from the late Talmudic period and the post-Talmudic period, which indicate the magic utilisation of such names, which were extracted principally from the Torah and the Book of Psalms by singling out certain determined letters which were often, but by no means always, the initial letters of the words of any given verse. One such book, by the name of *Shimushei Torah*, which means literally: "Theurgic applications of the Torah," recounts in its introduction that Moses obtained not only the text of the Torah (in the state of verbal partition corresponding to the version handed down to us) on Mount Sinai, but also those secret combinations of letters, the "names," which, when taken as a whole, constitute a different and altogether esoteric aspect of the Torah.³⁰

Among the first Kabbalists, however, who to a slight degree manipulated the accents somewhat, this magic tradition developed into a tradition which related to the mystical character of the Torah seen as a divine name which comprehended all the rest. This transition was achieved in two distinct steps. The first resides in a statement of Moses ben Nahman (Nakhmanides). This statement occurs in particularly conspicuous passages, namely in the preamble to his commentary on the Torah, which, in Jewish literature, has to occupy a preeminent position. Nakhmanides was the most authoritative spokesman of the first Spanish Kabbalists. His preponderant standpoint as a Talmudist assured the mystical stance of the Kabbalists now coming to light a central position in the Judaic camp. In his own words: "We have an authentic tradition, in accordance with which the whole of the Torah consists of divine names, namely in the manner in which the words, which we can read there, can be divided up in very varied ways, and namely into (esoteric) names ... In the Aggadic assertion, that the Torah was originally written with black fire upon white fire,³¹ we have a clear confirmation of our own opinion that the version as written down was a continuous

³⁰ A translation of this piece can be found in August Wensche, *Aus Israels lehrballe, kleine Midrashim*, vol. I, 1907, pp. 127-133, NB p. 132.

³¹ A 3rd century assertion, which has given rise to many speculations among the Kabbalists. Cf. for example, *Zur Kabbala und ihrer Symbolik*, pp. 70-71.

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script without verbal divisions; for this reason it was possible to read it as a series of (esoteric) names as well as a history in the traditional manner and a series of commandments. Thus it happened that the Torah was handed to Moses in a form in which the division into words also suggested that it be read as a series of divine commandments. Simultaneously, however, it was transmitted to him orally in such a way that it could be read as a series of names."

This mystical structure of the Torah as a series of divine names also explains, in the author's view, why each letter in the Torah is respectively important, and why a scroll of the Torah for synagogical use became unusable if it contained one letter too few or one letter too many. But this conception gave rise to the next simple step, in the direction of the still more radical thesis that the Torah consists not only of the divine names, but, in a specific sense, and as a whole, constitutes the one and only great name of God. This however is no longer a magic thesis; it is a purely mystical thesis. It is repeatedly and explicitly formulated by the more senior colleagues of Nakhmanides who were working with him at the kabbalistic center at Gerona: 'The five books of the Torah are *the Name* of the Sacred Being. Blessed be the Lord.'³² But this same thesis can also be found' in the *Sefer ha-khayim*, a text which is totally independent of the Kabbalists of Gerona, and which was printed in the first three decades of the 13th century in northern or central France. Unexpectedly it is ascribed to the speculative scholars, *anshei ha-mekhkar*, who are said to have declared that the Torah and the Throne of Glory are "the divine name itself," or, in another possible translation, "the substance of the illustrious name," *'ezem ha-shem hanikhbad*.³³ The fact that the author of the Book of Zohar, a classical product of the Spanish Kabbala of the 13th century, expressly assumes this interpretation in several instances

³² This formulation is found in Ezra ben Salomon, in his commentary on the Talmudic Aggadot, manuscript of the Vatican, Hebr. 294, folio 34a, in the revision of this text by his colleague Azriel, *Peruch Aggadoth*, ed. Tishby, 1943, p. 76, as well as in Jacob ben Sheshet's book *Emuna u-Bitachon*, which was erroneously printed under the name of the Nakhmanides, chap. 19. All these Kabbalists belong to the circle of mystics of Gerona.

³³ *Sefer he-Khayim*, ms. Parma de Rossi, 1390, folio 135a.

underlies the reason why this thesis has become the generally accepted kabbalistic doctrine.³⁴

"I would presume that this new concept was also thoroughly familiar to Nakhmanides, but that he shied away from the idea of giving expression to such a far-reaching mystical thesis in any specific work which was destined for a broad readership which was not initiated in to the kabbalistic doctrine. The assertion that the Torah is, in its essence, nothing more than the one and only great name of God, was certainly an audacious and almost foolhardy statement, which demands an explanation. Here the Torah is conceived of as a mystical whole, whose purpose, in the first analysis, does not consist in conveying a specific message, but rather in giving expression to the power and almightiness of God himself; this almightiness would seem to be concentrated in his "Name." This whole conception of the Torah as a Name does not mean that it is a question here of a name which could be pronounced as such; furthermore it has nothing to do with a rational understanding of the possible communicative and social functions of a name. The argument that the Torah is the divine name, signifies that, in the Torah, God has been able to express his transcendental being, or, anyway, at least that part or aspect of his being which can be revealed in and through the Creation. To go further than this: as the Torah was already considered by the ancient Aggadah as an instrument of the Creation, through which the world came into existence, so could this new conception of the Torah be considered as an extension and mystical re-interpretation of the older conception. For the instrument which assisted the world to come into existence, is certainly in this case far more than a mere instrument, in as far as, and we have referred to this earlier, it represents the concentrated power of God himself, and this power is expressed in the name."³⁵

In this context we are going far beyond the previous viewpoint, according to which the Torah embraces the secret laws and the harmonious order by which every created thing is ruled and controlled. This accordingly constitutes the general

³⁴ For example in Zohar III, 36a: "The whole Torah is a unique holy and mystic name." Similar definitions in II, 87b; III 80b, 176a.

³⁵ G. Scholem, *Zur Kabbala un ihrer Symbolik*, 1960, p. 59.

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law of the cosmos. It also establishes a far more deeply significant thesis, according to which all the concrete and serial interpretations of the Torah, considered as the language of the Name, represent nothing more than relative approximations of this unique absolute which, in the linguistic domain, is the name of God. These approximations can themselves lead to far-reaching truths about the Creation and the life of man. Each layer of meaning can be supplemented by another deeper layer, but in the infinite stages of the Creation they are in the last analysis no more than modifications of this absolute word, which is the Name.*

* The conclusion of this article by Gershom Scholem will appear next Issue of *Diogenes*.

GERSHOM SCHOLEM

The Name of God
and the Linguistic Theory
of the Kabbala

II

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THE NAME OF GOD
AND THE LINGUISTIC THEORY
OF THE KABBALA

(Part 2) *

3

The linguistic theory of the Kabbala, as it is explained in the writings of the Kabbalists of the 13th century—or at least basically implied in them—comes to rest upon a combination of the above-mentioned interpretations of the Book of Yetsira with the doctrine of the Name of God as a basis of that language. What is essentially new in this is the way in which the scope and range of a divine language—as understood by the Kabbalists—is brought into unique prominence over and beyond the realm of created man. In the Book of Yetsira there could still be some doubt as to whether the ten Sefiroth and the 22 letters were themselves thought of as created; and as we have seen, there is even considerable evidence in favor of this conception. In the doctrines and teachings of the Kabbalists, however, this is no longer the case. The ten original numbers have become ten emanations of the divine fullness of being. Where these are concerned one can only now talk in terms of creation in a meta-

Translated by Simon Pleasance.

* Part 1 appeared in No. 79 of "Diogenes."

phorical sense.³⁶ In the Sefiroth of the Kabbalists, God manifests himself in ten spheres or aspects of his activity. The 22 letters are themselves part and parcel of this area; they are configurations of the divine energies, which are themselves grounded in the world of the Sefiroth, and whose appearance in the world either beyond, outside or beneath this realm of the divine emanations is simply a gradual process of de-refinement and an intensified crystallization of those innermost signs of all things, as they correspond to the progressively evolving and increasingly condensed media of the creation. All creation, from the world of the highest angel to the lower realms of physical nature, refers symbolically to the law which operates within it—the law which governs in the world of the Sefiroth. In everything something is reflected—one might just as well say—from the realms which lie in the center of it. Everything is transparent, and in this state of transparency everything takes on a symbolic character. This means that every thing, beyond its own meaning, has something more, something which is part of that which shines into it or, as if in some devious way, that which has left its mark behind in it, forever. The Book of Yetsira was still far removed from this type of interpretation. For the Kabbalists, however, the Sefiroth and the letters, in which the word of God is explained, or which constitute the word of God, were simply two different methods in which the same reality might be represented in a symbolic manner. In other words: whether the process of the manifestation of God, his stepping outside under the symbol of the light, and his diffusion of knowledge and reflection is what is represented, or whether it is to be understood to be the activeness of the divine language, of the self-differentiating word of the creation or even of the self-explanatory name of God. In the last analysis, this, for the Kabbalists, is no more than a question of the choice between symbolic structures which are in themselves equally arranged—the symbolism of light and the symbolism of language.

The movement in which the creation comes about can therefore also be interpreted and explained in terms of a linguistic movement. All the observations and utterances of the Kabbalists

³⁶ Cf. my Eranos lecture on 'Creation from Nothing' In Eranos Yearbook, 25, 1957, which is published in an extended form in *Über einige Grundbegriffe des Judentums*, 1970, pp. 53-89 (Suhrkamp edition, 414).

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about this theme are rooted in this thesis. Of course, in the great majority of the Kabbalistic writings, the doctrine of emanation and the closely allied symbolism of light are intertwined with the mysticism of language and the symbolic interpretation of the letters as the hidden, secret signs of the divine in all spheres and stages which the process of the creation passes through. The Hebrew word *'oth* means not only letter but also, in the precise meaning of the term, sign, and more specifically mark (or signature). The plural *'othiyoth*, however, indicates the differentiation between the signs of God as miraculous signs, *'ototh*, and the signs of the letters as specific signatures. This, in any event, was how the first Kabbalists interpreted this difference in plural formation. At the same time Isaac the Blind—who is the first historically evident Kabbalist from Provence (c. . 1200)—interprets the Hebrew word *'oth* as a derivation of the verb *'atha*, "to come"; similarly, for him, the letters are signs which "are derived from their origins," that is, which refer to the hidden origins from which they, as signs in all things, stem. At the same time *'othi Yoth* could still also be interpreted as "what is coming"; and this would endow the letters with an added prophetic quality which indicates something future, and Messianic.³⁷

The commentary of Isaac the Blind on the Book of Yetsira is the oldest document pertaining to Kabbalistic linguistic mysticism which we possess.³⁸ The commencement of all the manifestations of the hidden godhead—the *En-sof* or infinite—is, in his view, described in the various stadia which the thought (of God) passes through in its advance towards the "source of speech" and from there to the words or *logoi* of God. In the Hebrew word *dawar* we find concealed the double meaning of thing, subject, and word, speech. Thus when Isaac the Blind speaks of the "things of the spirit," which are the hidden world of the Sefiroth, he has in mind at the same time the "words of the spirit," with which the thought finds expression. In the language employed in the

³⁷ For this explanation Isaac the Blind could be referring to passages such as Isaiah 41:23, in which the plural form *othiyoth* is used in the sense of the advent or future. David ben Simra also discussed this prophetic quality of the letters in his *Magen David* (On the Mysticism of the Alphabet), circa 1500, Amsterdam, 1713, fol. 51b.

³⁸ I published this text as an appendix to my Hebrew lectures on the Provence Kabbala in 1963.

Midrash we find that the word *dibbur*—speech model, or speech, when it is a question of the speech of God—has been replaced by the form *dibber*. In the world of God there is still no such thing as concretisation, and the *dibb'rim* or *dwarim* here are clearly still the words seen as the formative forces of all things. For *Isaac the Blind* there is a *conception of the En-sof which is still totally turned in upon itself, mute, and which is in itself as infinite as its own origin*. In his opinion, and only in his opinion, this conception is distinct from the Sophia. The thought itself, which is far more than a plan of the cosmos relative to the creation, and which can encompass aspects of the godhead that are totally unrelated and do not enter in to the creation, is considered in this respect as the first Sefira, whereas the Sophia, in which there is a concentration relative to an original point of departure, already contains the application of the thought in *terms of the Creation; as & result of this, everything which this application implies appears as the second Sefira*. And in Isaac's terminology this Sophia is the "commencement of speech," the original source of the word of God. In fact it is not considered yet as speech itself, but as origin and source. The Sefiroth, which issue from the Sophia, are linked, in their various configurations, with the letters, as are the words themselves in an opposite sense. As words of the creation these words constitute the world of the Sefiroth; they are configurations of the letters.

For the Kabbalists, of course, linguistic mysticism is at the same time a mysticism of writing. Every *act of speaking* is, in the world of the spirit, at once an act of writing, and every writing is potential speech, which is destined to become audible. The speaking party impresses, as it were, the three-dimensional space of the word into the Pneuma. "Writing, for the philologist, is no more than a secondary and extremely unmanageable image of real and effective speech; but for the Kabbalist it is the real centre of the mysteries of speech. The phonographic principle of a natural translation from speech into writing and, *vice versa*, from writing into speech operates in the Kabbala under the conception that the holy letters of the alphabet are themselves those lineaments and signs, which the modern phonetician would be looking for on his record. The creative word of God is legitimately and distinctly marked precisely in these holy lines. Beyond the spoken word lies unspoken reflection. This is the pure

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thought, which is itself the process of thinking—one might say, the mute inner contemplation in which the nameless is lodged."³⁹

From the Sophia the world of the pure name as the original element of the spoken word is opened up. It is identical to the world of the Sefiroth, This is how Isaac understood the thesis of the Book of Yetsira, which is mentioned above: namely that all speech issues from a name. For that tree of divine might, which, in the view of the Book of Bahir—the most ancient of all the Kabbalistic texts—forms the Sefiroth, appears to Isaac the Blind as a ramification of the letters in this great name. "The root (that is the spoken word and the things 'of the spirit' which are the words of God) consists in a name, for the letters (in which the name is set forth) are the branches which appear as the flames, flickering, and as the leaves of the tree, its branches and twigs, whose root is nonetheless always within the tree itself... and all *dewarim* take form, and all forms issue (finally) only from the one name, just as the twig issues from the root. It therefore follows that everything is contained in the root, which is the one name."⁴⁰ As a result, the world of speech is defined as the essential "world of the spirit." The letter is the element of cosmic writing. In the continuous act of the language of the creation the godhead is the only infinite speaker, but at the same time he is the original archetypal writer, who impresses his word deep into his created works,⁴¹

The letters, which are configurations of the divine creative force, thus represent the highest forms; and in as much as, in the earthly realm, they take on visible forms, they have bodies and souls, according to Isaac the Blind. Consequently the soul of each letter is clearly that which lives in it as a result of the articulation of the divine Pneuma. The fact that this "infinite speech" (*ha-dibbur be'en-sof*), which gives life to and contains everything that is created, found its outcome in the Torah, is an established fact for the Kabbalists. The way in which this outcome of the speech of God in creation and revelation is connected with his name, or respectively with the manifold

³⁹ Scholem, *Ursprung und Anfänge der Kabbala*, p. 244.

⁴⁰ As in Isaac's commentary on the book of *Yetsira*, II, 5, p. 10 of the text mentioned in note 38.

⁴¹ According to Molitor, *Philosophie der Geschichte oder über die Tradition*, Part I, 2nd edition, 1857, p. 553.

nature of his names, as indicated by the different *modi* of his being, is not dealt with by Isaac the Blind, just as he expresses himself with considerable reserve on the subject of the names of God, in particular.

In this respect, however, many of his successors were less reticent, especially the anonymous authors of a considerable number of tracts dating from the early 13th century, which I shall call the group of *Iyyun* writings, after a small but remarkably speculative treatise by the name of *Sefer ha'Iyyun*, "Book of Absorption" or contemplation. In these writings, which are for the most part very short, there is a link made between neo-Platonic ideas and the mysticism of light and Kabbalistic linguistic mysticism and particularly the mysticism of the divine name. Of course the old, pre-Kabbalistic esotericism which related to the association of the name of God with fiery lights was known to these authors. The following is a passage from one of these earliest texts, the Alphabet of Rabbi Akiba: "God sits upon a throne of fire and around him stand the ineffable names, *Shemot meforashim*, like pillars of fire."⁴² But it is only in these Kabbalistic writings that this metaphoricism is moved most forcefully to the foreground and the powers of creation are at once "intelligible lights" and names, which reveal themselves in the mystical world of the Merkaba, the *mundus intelligibilis*. Two tendencies spring from this: one proceeds from the letters and from them constructs the names; the other issues from the tetragram itself, seen as the most profound reality in the face of which all other names appear to be no more than relative—the symbolical expression of one of the infinite aspects of God's almightiness. Thus one of these texts describes the tetragram as "the root of all other names" and in this cycle it is often referred to by all as the "basic root, branch and fruit."⁴³ One can perhaps say that, for the Kabbalists, God is at once the shortest and the longest name. The shortest, because each individual letter in itself represents a name.⁴⁴ The longest, because it expresses itself first

⁴² *Bet ha-Midrash*, ed. A. Jellinek, III, 1855, p. 25.

⁴³ As in *Perush Shem ben 'arba Othjoth*, Ms. Florence, Plut. II, cod. 41 (of 1328), fol. 198.

⁴⁴ As in a treatise on the names of 42 letters, which appeared under the name of Haj Gaon, cf. my catalogue of the Kabbalistic manuscripts in Jerusalem, *Kithwei Yad be-Kabbala*, 1930 p. 217. This interpretation is based on a passage in the Midrash *Pessikta rabbat*, ed. Friedmann, fol. 104a, where one reads

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as being all-encompassing in the total whole of the entire Torah. In one of these texts, particularly, *Ma'ayan ha-hokhma* ("The Rings of Wisdom")—a very short work—which is always considered to be quite unusually difficult to interpret, linguistic mysticism forms the point of departure.⁴⁵ The book recognizes two opening points for all linguistic movement. The first is the consonant *Yod*, in regard to which the written form of this consonant in Hebrew—namely a small apostrophe made up almost totally of a dot shape—is as decisive as its position as the first consonant of the tetragram. In a visible symbol, the *Yod* is precisely the original source of language, and it is from this source that all other forms are made. The other is the consonant *Aleph*, the *Spiritus lenis*, whose role, from the phonetic viewpoint, is full of significance for the Kabbalist. It is the laryngeal voice-input of every vocal utterance, which was here understood to be the element from which—as the first member of the alphabetical sequence—every articulate sound originates, in the final analysis. For this author, the name of God, the Tetragram, is the oneness of the everspreading linguistic movement stemming from the original root, which comes into being in the original ether, the halo which surrounds God. This author is attempting to show how, from the movement of the *Aleph*, the as yet voiceless voice-input, the name of God and therefore all language issues. Although, in this evolution, the *Aleph* itself disappears, it nevertheless remains the point of indifference of all speaking, the "compensating tipping of the scales," as this is already indicated in one passage of the Book of Yetsira. Likewise, however, another kind of movement of the *Yod* occurs, the form of which is made up of two coincident right-angled apostrophes. These are the wings, which are evolved from the original source of the *Yod*, from the movement of the original point. As it is termed here, the *Yod* is the "purling well" of all linguistic movement, which ramifies and is differentiated in the infinite, but then returns once again in dialectical change into its focus and its original source.

in a discussion of the name *Tsebaoth*: "Every letter, 'oth, of the tetragram forms a plurality, *tsaba* (that is, reveals a dynamic) which corresponds to the plurality of the whole name."

⁴⁵ The book *Ma'yan Chokhma* has been printed quite frequently since 1651. Its contents, however, are only to any degree comprehensible from the *text* of the old manuscripts.

For the author of this writing the principle of the cyclical movement in all cosmogonical processes, which are described by him, held a particular fascination: precisely where these processes have been fully evolved and worked out, they do an about-face and return, in a cyclical sense, to their original source. The magical power of the speaking party is the power of one who knows how to change his place at the root of this linguistic movement, who therefore embraces all language and essential utterance and who is able to penetrate its workings.

Closely connected with the developmental stages of linguistic formation from the *Aleph* is the exposition of the *Aleph* in the "Explanation of the *Shem ha-meforash*" by Isaac the Blind's nephew and pupil Asher ben David, which we possess. He says: "The *Aleph* is the point of passivity, and whoever expresses the *Aleph* (in the soundless vocal input) thereby indicates the One, which is united and made into one within him. As a matter of fact the *Aleph* should appear and be pronounced last of all in the sequence of letters, because it is more profound and more mysterious than all the other letters, and if it does in fact appear at the beginning (of the alphabet), this is in order to render its status visible and to make known that all the letters which follow it feed (from its strength), and that they all spring from it and are nourished by it; and all letters can be inscribed within the figure of the *Aleph*, and if they are turned in all directions, you can still construct every other letter from the *Aleph*. The *Aleph*, more than any other letter, indicates oneness, and in this way we can understand verse 3 of Psalm 100, in accordance with the Massoretic writing:

"He made us and we are part of the *Aleph*."

That is we are part of that perfect oneness, from which everything is constantly and uninterruptedly part of his blessing. And from the movement of the other consonants which are contained in the letter-name *Aleph* the *Shem hameforash* is made, and this cannot be said of any other letter."⁴⁶

In this cycle too mention is made at the outset of one divine name which, in the later speculations of the Kabbalists, played quite a considerable part. As early as the 12th century, certain

⁴⁶ *Perush Shem ha-meforash*, ed. Chassida, 1934, p. 4.

Jewish philosophers, specifically Jehuda Halevi and Abraham ibn Esra, made certain observations about the fact that the four consonants which are found in the two most important divine names in the Torah—the name *Jahwe* and the name *Ehjah*—are precisely those which, are also used as vowel letters in Hebrew, *matres lectionis*. They represent, as it were, a connection between consonants and vowels, and one could regard them as the spiritual elements among the consonants. According to the philosophers this made them particularly suited as practical symbols of the divine spirit in the heavenly body, and thus suited to be the elements forming those two divine names. But it is only the Kabbalists of the *'Iyyun* group and then their followers who made one divine name out of these four letters, which appears to be to some extent the original source of all other names, and to another the actual original⁴⁷ name. According to the *Sefer ha'Iyyun* this is even the name which was sealed into the ring with which the earth was sealed. The thing which, for the Kabbalists, made the assumption of these philosophical observations and their reference to an original divine name especially acceptable, is the fact that the numerical, value of these four consonants in Hebrew is precisely 22—for in Hebrew each letter at the same time represents a number.⁴⁸ And so this could be a symbol which, as a name, embraces not only the whole alphabetical sequence but a name from which both those divine names could be formed.

In fact at the end of the 13th century one of the most important of the Kabbalists, Abraham Abulafia, went so far as to give voice to the opinion that this was the true and real original name of God, which even the Torah had some misgivings about undisguisedly revealing, in order not to reveal to the rabble,

⁴⁷ As at the end of *Ma'yan Chokhma*. In the manuscript in Munich, fol. 124-25, there is a closer mystical foundation for this divine name, which belongs to the same cycle.

⁴⁸ This is constantly evoked in texts about this name, e.g. even in the treatise of Elchanan ben Jakar of London (mid 13th century), MS. New York, "838" (according to the old numeration of the unprinted catalogue of Alexander Marx), fol. 98a, and in the fragment of Joseph Gikatilla's commentary on the Torah, MS. New York, "851", fol. 74b. Cf. also Gikatilla's *Ginnath Egos*, Hanau, 1615, fol. 55b.

⁴⁹ Here Abulafia uses the meaning in the Talmud in *Kidduschin* 71a, where (Exodus 3:15) it is indicated by a play of words that God wanted to keep his name hidden. For *shmi le 'olam* read *shmi le 'allem*.

who were not up to grasping the profound truths of mysticism, a mystery which could possibly have been abused: "You will ask me: if it is the case (that the letters Aleph, He, Waw and Yod constitute the actual name of God), why then is this name not indicated as the name of excellence? In fact that would have been appropriate. But because God desired to conceal his name, in order, thereby, to put to the test the hearts of his initiates and also to purify, cleanse and clarify their intellectual capability, it was consequently necessary to keep it hidden away and concealed. And for this reason his name is put together with those letters which (by grammarians) are called the letters of concealment. From that time on it was completely hidden, and even when they were deeply absorbed in it, not even the initiates and devotees could grasp any part of it, and the name (in the form of the tetragram) was only present for them on the path of tradition, but not on the path of intellectual knowledge. But it was necessary that he represent the moment of unity between two opposite poles, in order to bring into being and to perfection two types of human being, of which the psalmist says: (36.7): "Beasts and men seek refuge in the shadow of thy wings." And by this the spiritual (intellectual) and the ignorant are referred to,⁵⁰ of whom some absorb themselves speculatively in the name (YHWH), while the others simply accept his existence as a matter of tradition. The lowest fools (the uneducated rabble) were forbidden to utter it, and they pronounce it from then on not in accordance with his true name. The initiated were however allowed to utter his name, and they were very pleased with the fact that they were versed in the (right) procedures, whereby this pronunciation and expression was achieved... Thence, therefore, arose the reason for hiding it, and in addition the reason for revealing it. But if (instead of the Tetragram mentioned in the Torah) the four named letters *aleph*, *he*, *waw*, *yod* had formed a fixed name, and it had become necessary to make it known that these four consonants were

⁵⁰ In the Hebrew text this is a play on words: the two words are only differentiated by the writing of the *s* in *sekhlim*. The one word is written with *sin*, and means "intelligences"; the other is written with *samekh*, and then means "ignorant." In the following sentence, also, the word for "fools" is *kessilim*, which, according to the consonantal content, is identical to the "ignorant," *sekhlim*.

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the ones which play a part in every vowel, then the lowest rabble might have been amazed and made the objection that it was not possible that the name of God referred to these letters, because these letters served other letters as *matres lectionis*. For they had no conception of the rank (worth) of this highest true, state of affairs, and therefore it had to be revealed in other ways, in such a way that the ways would be comprehensible to the rabble,, but the revelation would not."⁵¹ The tetragram of the Torah is therefore no more than an emergency aid, behind which is hidden the true original name. In the two four-lettered names there are in each instance only three of the consonants which form the original name, and the fourth represents a doubling-up of one of them, namely the *He*. Moses Cordovero, a great 16th century Kabbalist, quotes, in his exhaustive compendium of the Kabbala, a resume" of Abulafia's expositions, without naming his sources and the author, and with extreme indignation rejects the thesis under discussion in it.⁵² That the true name of God did not even occur in the Torah was, indeed, a thesis of unmitigated radicality.

A variant of this interpretation, that a divine name, which contains these four letters in a somewhat different sequence, was in fact that true name of God before the creation of the world, and was only replaced by the customary tetragram for the purposes of the creation of this world, leads back to the circuit of the important Kabbalistic work, the book *Temuna*. In this book the forms of the Hebrew letters are explained as the mysterious, secret shape of God, as it becomes visible in the Torah. The prophet and mystic who looks at this mystic form of the godhead, discovers it in those signatures of the letters which are nothing else than the muted language of God. It is only in the present age that the place of this original name has been taken by the tetragram, in the form of the Torah which has become legible to us. In the Messianic age, however, which preludes the end of this age, it is once again dislodged from its position by the original name. And more than this: this book recognizes a successive series of aeons or creative periods—called *Sh'mittoth*, in which the whole world process is completed. In

⁵¹ Abraham Abulafia, *Or ha-sekkel*, MS. Munich. Hebr. 92, fol. 54 a/b, in which the text is wrong in two passages, which I have amended.

⁵² Moses Cordovero, *Pardes Rimmonim*, chap. 21, section 3.

each one of these *Sh'mittoth* the immutable being of the Torah appears in differing manifestations or, respectively, readings, which correspond to the expression which the divine language has assumed in the aeon in question. At the end of the cosmic process, however, all things return in the "great jubilee year" to their original source in the third Sefira, the *Bina*; and all emanations and worlds disappear. The name of God, which is nevertheless maintained in this condition of the return of all things into the divine bosom, is precisely this original name, which is accordingly nothing more than a revelation of the divine being, which in itself, is directed at nothing else outside it.⁵³ The acceptance of such an original name, which is in contrast with the other names of God, indicates a difference which makes itself felt in not a few Kabbalistic writings. There exists an unsettled contradiction between two points of view. The one, as it is to some extent represented in the sources just mentioned, clearly sets forth that fact that God, as he in himself exists—that is beyond any perspective of the creation—has a name which is only known to God himself, a name which, as one might perhaps put it, expresses his self-awareness. In opposition to this we find, in the great majority of the Kabbalistic sources, the point of view, which is also that of the *Zohar*, that the *deus absconditus* is nameless. All names are condensations of the energy which radiates forth from him. They therefore represent the linguistic innerness of the cosmic process, which becomes symbolically perceptible to us as the evolving "word of God." Many Kabbalists, from Abraham Abulafia to Moses Cordovero, derive the Hebrew expression *dibbur 'elohi*—"divine word" or "divine speech"—from the meaning which this root has, above all, in the Aramaic language, namely: to lead, or to guide. This basically therefore coincides with the idea of cosmic guidance, and the "names" of God each represent a defined tendency of this cosmic guidance. Consequently, as long as it seemed expedient to the Kabbalists, linguistic mysticism could be interpreted as a metaphorical expression of generally theological conceptions and could be adjusted to them.⁵⁴ Under such a con-

⁵³ As in the explanation of the name of 72 letters, which was drawn up as a kind of preface in the context of the book *Temuna*, where there is a closer amplification in the old marginal notes to this text, e.g. MS. Paris, 775, fol. 10a.

⁵⁴ As, for example, in Abulafia's *Or ha-sekhelel*, MS. Munich, 92, fol. 66a, and Cordovero's *Pardes Rimmonim* chap. 19. section 1. Here Cordovero says that

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ception the word of course works rather like a total whole, in relation to which the re-possession of its elements in the letters is in a certain state of tension, and in fact the Kabbalists generally avoid making any more precise specification of the association in which this interpretation of the word as a rudder guiding divine thought in a certain direction stands with the details of linguistic mysticism as the movement of the original letters.

The fact that, as I have said, the mystical names of God are condensations, concentrations of the radiations of God, and that they therefore belong to a metaphysical sphere in which the optical and die acoustic coincide, becomes quite clear in several passages in the literature of the *'Iyyun* group. They are at once intellectual lights as well as sounds. Furthermore, in the case of many Kabbalists, who followed in the footsteps of this group, connections between the divine and the human proper names are not in principle excluded. For this aspect the linguistic mysticism of Jacob ben Jacob Kohen of Soria is somewhat characteristic. This author, in about 1260-70, wrote a fairly extensive commentary on the prophet Ezekiel's vision of the Merkaba, in which, among other things, he deals with the 72 names of God which were formed from the three verses in Exodus 14:19-21, each verse numbering 72 consonants, Namely:

"Note that the 72 holy names (that is in the sovereign world of the Merkaba) serve and are united with the essence of the Mearkaba itself. And they are like gleaming pillars of light and are called (in the Bible) *bonei Elohim*, and the whole host of heaven regards them with reverence like retainers paying homage to the king's sons... It is well-known that the names given to men are not attributes; but the body has an essence and the quality of attribute. The proper name, however, is something accessory (coming from without); it is like the issue from the tablet of the patriarchs, in accordance with the etymological explanation of it, as given in the Bible. The name is thus something other than the being (or essence); it is neither sub-

the tetragram only becomes effective as a force in the world by virtue of the fact that it formerly disguised itself in one of the other names; for it is only in this way that these spiritual letters can adorn themselves in the earthly ether and have their effect there; and this would not have been possible for it outside the region of the temple, on account of its especial majesty and holiness.

stance nor attribute; and it is not anything that has concrete reality. The body, on the other hand, is both, substance and attribute, and is also something that has a concrete reality. At this point the name joins together with the being (or essence); the divine names, however, are the being (or essence) itself; they are powers of the godhead; and their substance is the substance of the "Light of Life" (one of the highest of the Sefiroth). But if one wants to make some precise relation with the proper names of men, one will find that they and the beings (or essences) (which they denote) are one, with the result that the name cannot be separated and differentiated from the being (or essence), nor, similarly, the being (or essence) from the name. Because the name is directly linked with the being (or essence)... In this way, then, even the names of men are endowed with being (or essence), and it certainly cannot be said that the divine names are not to some extent endowed with being (or essence), for they are all intellectual divine powers, which are carved out of the "marvellous Light" (which stands even more exalted than the "Light of Life"). Do not think that all the divine names, like the name of 12 or 42 or 72 letters and all the other countless mystical names, are merely unsubstantial words, for they all consist of letters which soar in an upward direction. The masters of the Kabbala have said of the letters relative to the name of 42 letters that they soar up and up until they reach the Merkaba itself, where they become pillars of light, which unite with one another in one great beam; and even the glory of God unites with them and ascends and conceals itself even in the infinitely sublime and secret realm."⁵⁶

In the language of man we have a reflected splendor, a reflection of the divine language, which coincide with one another in the revelation. Friedrich Schlegel, the great figure at the head of early Romanticism, used to remark that philosophers should be grammarians. One cannot say this of mystics, for the Divine language, the "inner word" with which this language

⁵⁵ In all hitherto known manuscripts the commentary is anonymous. The author does however remain established by virtue of the fact that Moses Zinfa of Burgos quotes detailed passages from it in his writings, as he also does from the work of his teacher, Jakob Kohen.

⁵⁶ Cf. the Hebrew text in my catalogue of the Kabbalistic manuscripts in Jerusalem, 1930, pp. 208-209. In one passage I have corrected on the basis of the manuscripts a wrong interpretation that disturbed the overall significance.

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has to do, does not involve any grammar. It consists of names, which are more than ideas here. In the language of man the task of rediscovering the name is, in essence, the concern which lies behind the Kabbalistic conception of the nature of prayer. The tradition of the so-called German Hasidim in the 12th century placed, right in the central point of its meditations on prayers, the main consideration on the names which lie behind the words. It is these which are, in reality, evoked from the words of the prayer—one could almost say conjured up by the words of the prayer. By various procedures entailing the numerology, combination and positioning of the words of the prayer, this hidden dimension pertaining to them is discovered. In this dimension the prayer, the appeal to God, is at the same time a disappearing act into this name, an act which does not dispense with the element of conjuring-up. In the Kabbalistic teachings on the mystical aspect of prayer these projections have, above all in the Lurianic Kabbala—right up to the latest developments in it—played an important role. The great mystic prayer-books of Rabbi Shalom Shar‘abi (d. 1777) are complete scores, in which the handed-down text of the principal prayers is accompanied by a graphic, almost (musical) note-like representation of the divine names and their variations; and this is engraved in these words by the meditation of the person praying.⁵⁷ In this respect it is therefore a matter of something like a reversed transformation of the differentiated language of man into the language of the divine names, which is visible in it in a symbolic way. This is not the *whole* Kabbalistic theory of prayer, in which other aspects and instances are also of importance, but it is the linguistic-mystical aspect of the theory, and under our association this is important. The names are also latent in communicative words.

But let us return to the other major point of importance, which is integral for the Kabbalistic theory of language: namely, the conception of the Torah as the language of God. At an earlier stage we discussed its conception as the name of God. What we should understand from this becomes particularly clear from the writings of the influential Spanish Kabbalist, Joseph Gikatilla from Medinat Celi. These writings are at the same

⁵⁷ This astonishing score for mystical meditations, the so-called *Siddur* of Shalom Shar‘abi, was printed to Jerusalem in 1916.

time closely connected in a profound sense in many aspects with the book Zohar. According to him, the Torah, as published, is completely founded and built on the tetragram; it is woven from the tetragram and its qualifying names, that is, from the divine epithets which are derivable from it, and emerge in it at any given moment. It is a web of such qualifying names, which, for their part, are once again woven from the various names of God, for example, *El*, *Elohim*, and *Shaddai*. But in the final analysis these holy names themselves all derive from the tetragram too; they are allied to it and they are all united in it. "All the names of the Torah are contained in the four-lettered name, which is called the trunk of the tree, and all the other names are either roots or ramifications of this."⁵⁸ The Torah is therefore a living garment and tissue, a *textus* in the most accurate understanding of the term, in which, as a kind of basic motif and as a leitmotif, the tetragram is woven in a hidden way and sometimes even directly; and, in any event, the tetragram refers back to it in every possible kind of metamorphosis and variation. It is not simply a structure which encompasses the great names in their totality; it is at the same time a structure which is built out of a fundamental element, namely out of that four-lettered name. In as much as God associated the letters of this name with the letters of the alphabet—according to the procedures as outlined in the book of Yetsira—permutated and combined them, and interchanged them with each other following certain laws, so the other divine names and appellatives—*kinnuyim*—were formed; and in as much as this process is repeated in respect of these elements they do conclusively contain that stock of letters which we read in the Torah in the communicative form of the Hebrew sentences.

In an only recently unearthed concluding section to one of his works, Gikatilla gives some more elaborate opinion on the mystical nature of the Torah. The fact that the Torah, in accordance with the rabbinical precept, had to be written for use in the synagogue without any further accessories and only with its stock of consonants—under which precept fixed apostrophes are applied to certain consonants by the process of transmission—indicates to Gikatilla the infinite levels of meaning

⁵⁸ Gikatilla, *Sha'arei Ora*, Offenbach, 1715, fol. 2b and 4b.

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(with the agreement of the Kabbalists of his time) which potentially lie latent in this stock of consonants, and whose totality of meaning would be limited, by a vocalised written form. Just as flames have no single or unique shape and color, similarly the role of the Torah has, in its various tenets, no single or unique sense; it can be expounded in various ways. From this generally recognized thesis, however, he draws a far-reaching inference: In the world of the angels this meaning is read differently than it is in the world of the spheres, not to mention in the lower, earthly world, and the same goes for the millions of worlds which are contained in these three worlds. In each one of them the Torah is read and interpreted in different ways. The manner of reading and interpretation corresponds to the power of comprehension and nature of these worlds.⁵⁹ In these millions of worlds, therefore, in which created beings hear the manifestation (revelation) and language of God, the Torah can be interpreted in an infinite fullness of meaning. In other words the word of God, which extends into all worlds, is in fact infinitely pregnant with meaning, but has no fixed interpretation. As I have already remarked in this article, it is purely and simply that which is interpretable. In this respect Gikatilla even goes so far as to define the book of the Torah as "the form of the mystical world"; but he hesitates when it comes to defining this proposal more closely. In the canonical consonantal text of the Torah we find all these infinite possibilities of its conception potentially contained. For the Kabbalists the fact that God expresses his own self in this way extended into language, but such expression might still be so far removed from human understanding, because it is infinitely more significant than any specific meaning or communication which such an expression might be able to communicate. For the language of God is an absolute; it is set forth in its manifestations in all worlds in manifold meanings; and it is from here that the language of men also derives its majesty, even if it is apparently directed at communication.⁶⁰

The opinion expressed here by Gikatilla in a classical fashion has thus passed through many phases of development, not

⁵⁹ E. Gottlieb, *Tarbiz*, 39, 1970, published this conclusion of the book *Sha'arei Tsedek*; cf. there, in particular, pp. 382-383.

⁶⁰ Scholem, *Zur Kabbala und ihrer Symbolik*, p. 63.

withstanding. The author of the book *Tikkunei Zohar*, who was writing in Spain in about 1300, accepted it in the context of its expositions about both aspects of the Torah—the way in which it appears in the world of divine emanations and the way it appears in the world of the Creation. In the former it is still a purely mystical context of a spiritual nature, whereas in the latter it has materialized in correspondence with the nature of the Creation. The mystical nucleus is still hidden in this discourse, but it is embedded as a concealed level of meaning or as concealed levels of meaning in the crust of the Torah, which communicates what is real and essential or governs what is real and essential, in an historical sense.⁶¹

Of particular interest here is the final form of these conceptions, as they are set forth in the writings of Israel Saruk—a Platonizing Kabbalist of the Lurianic school (c. 1600)—and in the writings of the innumerable authors who came under his influence. Here the coming into being of the linguistic movement, which has its original source in the infinite being of God himself, proceeds from the fact that, in God, a joy, a sense of delight or self-rapture, held sway—in Hebrew,—*Shi'shu'a*—which evoked a movement in the *En-sof*. This movement is the original source of all linguistic movement, for, although still elapsing in the *En-sof* itself, it could be explained in those combinations of the 22 letters of the alphabet, which are mentioned in the book of Yetsira. From this a movement comes into being in the *En-sof* "from itself to itself," a movement in which that joy of the *En-sof* gives self-expression to itself, but thereby at the same time expresses the mysterious potentialities of all expression. From this innermost movement the original texture—in Hebrew *malbush*—is woven in the substance of the *En-sof* itself. This is the actual original Torah, in which, in an extremely remarkable way, the writing—the hidden signature of God—precedes the act of speaking. With the result that, in the final analysis, speech comes into being from the sound-evolution of writing, and not *vice versa*. According to Saruk, this combination of letters was issued in a determined sequence from this original movement. In the *malbush* they are accompanied by the four-lettered divine name, and this can be interpreted in different ways. Specifically, the

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 91-92, in which the sources of this are also indicated on p. 271.

Kabbalists recognize four different methods of thus extending the tetragram by writing the individual consonants by their completely written-out lettered names, in such a way that four names come into being, whose numerical value, respectively, is 45, 52, 63 and 72. When *En-sof* entwined itself within itself this texture of the original Torah folded up and remained as the original force of all linguistic movement in *En-sof*. However a *Yod* of one of the names mentioned was lodged in the original space which had been liberated in the process of the *tsimtsum*; and this *Yod*, in its force which is gathered together in the almost dot-shaped *Yod*, transferred that linguistic movement to all emanations and worlds in the process of formation. In the highest world, according to this conception, the Torah—as in that original texture—simply forms a series of that combination of the Hebrew alphabet from two consonants respectively. The nuclei of all the further possibilities entailed in this linguistic movement reside in its original arrangement. It is only in the second world that the Torah manifests itself as a series of mystical divine names, which are formed by certain further combinations of the first elements. It contains the same letters, but not in the same sequence as the Torah which is available to us. In the third world the letters appear as angelic beings, whose names are indicated here, at least according to their first letter. It is only in the last world that the Torah is perceptible in the transmitted way, even if, in this world, in hidden ways, the names of all things and of all human beings are implicitly contained; that is the world of language and names above all else.⁶²

⁶² This doctrine is first of all developed in the book *Limmudei atsiluth*, Munkacz 1897, fol. 3a, 15a/b and above all 21d-22a. This book is printed under the name Chajim Vitals, but its author is without doubt Israel Saruk. Worthy of note is the fact that one of the most ancient manuscripts, which contains transcripts of Saruk's tracts which are to be found in Italy, namely MS. Jerusalem 4° 612 (written in Asti in 1602), completely overlooks this new doctrine of the original stuff of the *En-sof* as the original Torah. Leon Modena in Venice, who was an acquaintance of Saruk and testifies to the fact that his treatises tried to unite the Kabbala of Luria with the philosophy of Plato, presumably had thought about this doctrine: what for Plato was the world of original ideas, is here the world of the names of God, which form the *malbush*. The notion of the *shi'ashu'a* of God stems from Moses Cordovero's later writings (between 1560 and 1570). Cf. Joseph Ben-Shlomo, *The Mystical Theology of Moses Cordovero* (in Hebrew), Jerusalem, 1965, pp. 60-61. Cordovero, however, has not yet made Saruk's inferences about the coming into being of the movement of language

The original, paradisaical language of men still had this character of the sacred. In other words it was immediately and undisguisedly connected with the being of those things which it wanted to express. The echo of the divine was still present in this language, for in the breath of the divine Pnuma the linguistic movement of the Creator was transformed into that of the thing created. It was the complexity of language, which came about as a consequence of magical *hybris*, and with which man undertook to "make a name" for himself—as we are told in Genesis 11.4—which evoked the profane languages. There were Kabbalists who were of the opinion that purely profane concepts were not part of the original language, Hebrew, because of the fact that, from the very outset, it had in one way been destined for profane usage. The generation which wanted to build the tower of Babel abused this genuine sacred language in a magical way, in order to imitate, to a certain extent, the creativity of God with the help of knowledge of the pure names of things; and to obtain, surreptitiously, a name for itself which could be used on any given occasion. The linguistic complexity consisted in the far-reaching loss of this language from memory, with the result that those concerned had to re-invent and re-conceive the designation and naming of individual things. From this fact stems the in fact conventional character of the profane languages as compared with the sacred character of the Hebrew language. But even the holy language has since become mixed with the profane, just as here and there in the profane languages we still find elements of the holy.⁶³

It is noteworthy that the author of the Zohar expresses himself comparatively reservedly on the subject of language. It is quite clear that the symbolism of the ten Sefiroth as the mystical form of God, which takes its image in the structure of the word, is closer to his understanding than the symbolism

from this inner movement of the *En-sof*. Saruk's theory has been developed in considerable detail in many later works, as for example in Menachem Asarja Fano, *Shiv'im u-schtajim jedi'oth*, 1867; Naftali Bacharach, *Emek ha-melech*, 1648, chap. 1, sections 1-61 (on the different reading of the Torah in the four worlds at the end of section 4); Moses Graf, of Prague, *Wajakhel Moshe*, Dessau, 1699, fol. 1-10.

⁶³ These propositions stem from Jesaja Horowitz, *Shmei luhoth ha-brith*. I made reference to them as a result of an explanation of his thought by Benjamin Cohen in the weekly paper *Der Israelit*, 1935, No. 44, p. 4.

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of language. He explains the utterances of God during the creation of the world as "the force, which, in hiding, was singled out from the mystery of the *En-sof*, at the beginning, when the concept of the Creation was being formed." The activity which ensued from this is that which the Torah designates as speaking.⁶⁴ The occurrence of emanation can also be represented as the occurrence of language, for the innermost thought turns into a still quite hidden and noiseless voice, the voice from which all language is born, and which in turn changes into a still inarticulate sound. It is only when this sound is further explained that the articulation of word and speech comes into being in it, and this is the last stage of the self-revelation of God.

The strongest expression of this has been found by the thought-processes, which were set forth here, in the writings of the Spanish Kabbalist, Abraham Abulafia, from Saragossa. The main bulk of this author's work, as we know it today, was published between 1280 and 1291 in Southern Italy and Sicily precisely at the time when Moses de Leon, in Castille, produced the book of Zohar. At the center of these writings of Abulafia lies the mysticism of language, a fact which has an even more striking effect when, in his writings, the author constantly declares himself to be a radical partisan and follower of Maimonides, in whose strictly Aristotelian-Arabic school of philosophy—with supplementary neo-Platonic elements—mystical conceptions concerning language and above all the theory of language play no part at all. But Abulafia does maintain that his own doctrine does only represent the esoteric side, carefully concealed by Maimonides, of his world of thought, to which Maimonides alludes in more places than one in his principal philosophic work, the "Leader of the Confused," and about whose form even his most shrewd interpreters to date cannot agree. This aspect of Abulafia's world of ideas, where it is incorporated in that of Maimonides, is nevertheless irrelevant to our explanations, no matter how

⁶⁴ Schar I, 16b. The concept of the silent and audible voice is developed in several instances in the Sohar and in Moses de Leon and Josef Gikatilla in connection with the symbolism of the Shofar. The inarticulate original sounds which ring out from the Widdernhorn—the Shofar—on new year's day, contain principally all the utterances of language in their potentiality. In the view of later Kabbalists the voice of the Shofar embraces all the prayers of the year to come; cf. with these ideas Gershom H. Leiner, *Sod Jesharin* I, (Kabbalistisches über das Neujahrsfest), 1902, fol. 2d/3c.

important it may be in itself. Because, in any event, his theory of language is not taken from here, but from his Kabbalistic masters, and thence further developed in his own manner.

The focal point of Abulafia's interest, as was the case with Maimonides, lies, in fact, in the doctrine of the essence of prophecy, with the one admittedly incisive difference, that for Maimonides prophecy is a very high phenomenon of the human spirit in its relationship to God, but one which cannot be actualized in the present; it can only become something vital again in the Messianic era. For Abulafia, on the other hand, prophecy can also be achieved in this era, and his writings represent an attempt to make the way to prophecy passable and to a certain extent instructable. This doctrine, however, is based on a quite definite linguistic mysticism, which is expounded by means of a strangely rationalistic form of wording.⁶⁵ In this respect he takes as his point of departure that linguistic theory of the book of Yetsira, which has been set forth above, and from which he draws radical inferences.⁶⁶ Creation, revelation and prophecy, for Abulafia, are phenomena of the world of language: creation as an act of divine writing, in which the writing forms the matter of the creation; revelation and prophecy as acts, in which the divine word is infused into the language of man not just once but in the last analysis over and over again, and endows it with infinite wealth of immeasurable insight into the interdependence of things.

The representation of the creation as an act of divine writing, in which God's language penetrates things, and leaves them behind as his signatures in them, recurs in many passages in his works.⁶⁷ "The mystery that lies at the basis of the 'host' (of all things) is the letter, and every letter is a sign (symbol) and

⁶⁵ Abulafia, who has studied the writings of Aristotle and relies on them quite happily in philosophical considerations, has, rather surprisingly, not read Plato at all, even though M. H. Landauer, who made the first study of Abulafia's writings, asserts the contrary view. Cf. *Literaturblatt des Orient*, VI, 1845, col. 488. In his book about Alfarabi, written in 1869 (p. 249) Steinschneider has indicated that the only quotation from Plato in Abulafia's work is taken from the *Liber de causis*, an epitome of the *Institutio Theologica* of Proclus.

⁶⁶ A general characteristic of Abulafia's Kabbala is to be found in chapter 4 of my book: *Die jüdische Mystik in ihren Hauptströmungen*.

⁶⁷ As, for example, in *Or ha-sekkel*, chap. 8, section 5, which is published by A. Jellinek, *Philosophie und Kabbala*, book I, 1854, pp. 3940, as well as in his commentary on the Yetsira, *Gan na'ul*, MS. Munich, Hebrew 58, fo. 320 b.

indication of the creation." Just as any writer holds the plume in his hand and with it takes up drops of ink and in his mind traces out the form which he wants to give to his substance, at which moment the hand is like the living sphere, and the inanimate plume, which serves as the hand's instrument, moves and links itself to the hand, in order to spread the drops of ink across the parchment, which represents the body, which is used as the bearer of the substance and the form—in precisely the same way do things occur in the matter of the creation in its upper and lower spheres, as the intelligent person will understand, for it is not permitted to explain it more closely than this. Therefore are the letters set up as signs (symbols) and indications, so that through them the matter of reality, its forms, the forces and overseers which motivate it (that is: the intermediate parties), its minds and its souls can be given some form, and therefore is wisdom (in the sense of true knowledge) contained and gathered up, concentrated in the letters and the Sefiroth and the names, and all these are composed the one from the other."⁶⁸ The letters themselves have substance and form, especially in their written form of being, though far less so or rather in a spiritualized sense in their spoken or conceptual form. What, in the image above, was the ink, which translates this formal element into matter, is, in the organic creation and in the human realm, the seed, which already contains the substance and the forms which shall evolve from it.⁶⁹

The most significant moment in Abulafia's linguistic mysticism is represented, however, by his doctrine of the combination of letters and their movement through the different vowels. He designates this as the real knowledge of prophecy, that is, as a methodically sure way in which to prepare oneself for the contact with the word of God, the divine language, which is part of man's capacity for language. The bearer of this divine act of speaking, the *dibbur 'elohi*, is, for Abulafia at least, the

⁶⁸ *Ner Elohim*, MS. Munich 10, fol. 164 b. I hesitate in my judgement of the question whether this book was written by Abulafia himself or by one of his pupils.

⁶⁹ *Philosophie und Kabbala*, p. 17. The open letter printed there on the "seven ways" in which an understanding of the Torah can be achieved, contains a condensed compilation of Abulafia's trains of thought, as they are developed in considerable detail in his other writings.

"active intellect," which had changed in the Arabic and Jewish philosophy of the Middle Ages from a capacity invested in the soul of man, as it was conceived of in the psychology of Aristotle, to a cosmic potency, which, in Maimonides for example, appears as the intelligence of the last sphere above the sublunar world. Each one of the spheres of the Ptolemaic cosmic image, namely, corresponded here to an intelligence inherent in it, which was an intellectual operation of the divine creative design. These intelligences emanate from each other, and the last one, the *intellectus agens*, is the cosmic potency, from which all forms of the visible creation stem. In the sense given by classical Arabic philosophy and its elaboration at the hands of Maimonides, prophecy consists in the uniting of the human mind, which actualizes itself by the process of thought and is an invigorating phenomenon, with this form-giving potency, which the divine communicates to it by images which are induced in that prophetic contact in its imagination. Abulafia takes on this theory of prophecy as a uniting of the most highly developed intellectual and imaginative capacities of man with the *intellectus agens*.

What is new about this is the doctrine of the linguistic essence of this association. In this respect it must be said that Abulafia came to the assistance of the philosophical linguistic usage of mediaeval Hebrew, in which the adjective *devari*, which literally means "linguistic" (as Abulafia understood it), generally has the meaning of "sensible" or "rational." What, in the language of the philosophers, was called the ability of reason of man, could therefore also be understood as linguistic capacity.

Abulafia links those spheres in which—as has been demonstrated above—the book of Yetsira lets the 22 letters be fixed. By their various combinations these letters result in the original sounds of language. Abulafia lets them be fixed with that tenth sphere of medieval cosmogony, as in Maimonides, the intellect of which is cosmic reason, the *intellectus agens*. He can say, therefore, that, according to the author of the book of Yetsira, the 22 letters, which are the basis of all language, move in the tenth sphere, which is the most eminent among all the spheres of reality and the first in terms of rank. This is at once the sphere of the Torah and the divine commandment, by which all things both above and below are guided and of which it is said: Heaven was created through the word of God and all the heavenly host

by the breath of his mouth.⁷⁰ The sphere and language and the Torah is therefore that which presents itself in the most exalted promotion of man, in contact with the *intellectus agens*. In it the "mystery of languages" lies enclosed. In the final analysis all languages of the world issue from this mystery, even in places where they spring not only from the general natural capacity of speech and form themselves from it—as is the case with the Hebrew language, which is considered as an original language, but they also are based, in the detail, on the mere convention of the linguistically endowed being. The Babylonian confusion of language did, it is true, induce and fragment the holy language into the seventy languages, but in the last analysis even they are still contained in it. "The original cause of the prophecy resides in the form of address which issued from God and was heard by the prophets, through the medium of the perfect language, which embraces all the seventy languages within it."⁷¹ The closer explanation of the essence of the "inner speech" of man, which operates in the sensible soul, is developed by Abulafia by taking as a basis the propositions of the book of Yetsira about the constitution of language. This he does particularly in his work *Or ha-sekkel*,—"The Light of the Intellect"—which has been widely diffused among Kabbalistic circles. Divine speech which comes from the sphere of the active intellect which embraces at once reason-and-Torah and reason-and-revelation represents the true essence of prophecy. And this intellect is effective with regard to man's linguistic capacity.⁷² "For the hearts of men are to God what parchment is to us; and the parchment as a substance bears the form of the letters which are inscribed in it with ink. So for God the hearts are as slates and the souls as ink and words, which come to them from Him; and this is at once knowledge, which is like the form of the letters that were inscribed on both sides of the tablets of the covenant... and although, for God, words are not one of the

⁷⁰ *Or ha-sekkel*, MS. Munich 92, fol. 43b.

⁷¹ *Philosophie und Kabbala*, p. 8.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 4. In this assertion Abulafia is reliant upon the famous chapter (II: 36) of the *Führer der Verwirrten* (Leader of the Confused) which discusses the essence of prophecy. Nevertheless the moment—decisive for Abulafia—of the linguistic being (essence) of the prophecy is in fact missing here. As his explanations (I, 65) there prove, Maimonides has stuck by his rejection of a real "speech of God," and devalued it into the realm of the metaphorical.

forms of speech, which can be expressed by the heart which absorbs them, they are still words." In this divine address, the language coincides with the true intellectual knowledge which the prophet attains. Prophetic knowledge is directly identical with the current of divine words which comes to him.⁷³

For Abulafia the name of God is the highest expression, in which all linguistic movement is epitomized, as if in a focus. It is this name which vibrates in every process of the connection of the letters and the connection of their connections right into the realm of the infinite.⁷⁴ All created things are endowed with reality in as much as they participate in this "great name" to any degree whatsoever. The movement of the letters themselves also draws the letters of the divine name into their connections. The combinations of the letters and the combinations of these combinations and so on and so forth, in which the name of God is explicitly explained and developed in the medium of the written, phonetically spoken and inwardly conceived letters as far as the stage of human language, these combinations contain all generally possible truths, intellectual areas of knowledge, not only of human science but also of divine things. Every act in which the letters combine in such a way is at once an act of knowledge, even when this knowledge is obscured from us and undecipherable. As a result, Abulafia can at once include the metaphysical truths of philosophy, which, for him, found their zenith in Maimonides, as he can those of mysticism, which, in essence, is identical with the way which leads to prophecy, in this knowledge of the connection of linguistic elements. For everything flows from this knowledge and everything is founded on this knowledge, which he calls *hokhmat ha-tseruf*, and which is called knowledge of the process of combination.

⁷³ Or *ha-sekkel*, fol. 66b.

⁷⁴ In the progress of language, which is composed and formed by the names and letters, it is Abulafia's view that an important part is played by the methods of the Gematria, the acrostic, the substitution of letters in accordance with certain rules. In this way the substitutions occurring accordingly can be exchanged and transposed once again from other viewpoints. With the aid of these methods all language can be understood from the unfolding of the one name of God into the combinations of the alphabet. When Abulafia talks of ten-fold substitutions, which thus pass through the elements of language, it is his view that this limitation can only be ascribed to the weakness of man's faculty of comprehension. In principle, that is, this process of the substitution of letters can be carried on into the realm of the infinite. Cf. *Philosophie und Kabbala*, p. 4, before the passage noted in note 72.

I have already remarked in this paper that the language of God, of which the Kabbalists talk, does not have any grammar. One should nonetheless say that Abulafia's *hokhmat ha-tseruf* represents a course in this language, even if this course is not exactly grammatical. Of course, no less than any linguistic doctrine, it is an instruction in ordered meditation, the subject of which is not images and symbols but the letters and the names of God, in fact the one and only "great name" of God. At this stage I shall not go into this mystical aspect of the matter, which is withdrawn from elementary representation. It simply represents a projection of his linguistic theory on to the doctrine of progressive meditation on language as a way to mystical knowledge. The *hokhmat ha-tseruf* for him is the "knowledge of the higher, inner (i.e. mystical) logic," which can dispense with syllogistic logic.⁷⁵ For the "mysteries of the Torah," which are opened up in it, are, by their very nature, dialectical—as Abulafia says in an extremely bold use of ambiguity in the Hebrew expression *sithrei tora*. These mysteries are not only mysteries; they are also contradictions and paradoxes. It is the solution of these mysteries which absorption in the *hokhmat ha-tseruf* promises.⁷⁶ This latter is the "prophetic knowledge," measured against which the knowledge possessed by philosophers and metaphysicians on any estimation is still of an extremely slender order. It is therefore the mother of all other forms of knowledge, which derive their strength from it, and whoever masters it shall directly and "with ease" achieve that prophetic unison with the *intellect us agens*.⁷⁷

This deeper knowledge joins languages to each other. Even foreign languages are included in the knowledge of this linguistic mysticism.⁷⁸ "I heard the word of my innermost heart and hastened to do its bidding and fulfil its desire, and I did what was desired and I wrote out names and combined them and checked them and analysed them in the forge of thought,

⁷⁵ *Philosophie und Kabbala*, p. 15.

⁷⁶ *Chajei ha-nefesh*, Ms. Munich 408, fol. 71b - 72 a. Cf. in this respect Al. Altmann in the *Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums*, 80, 1936, p. 311.

⁷⁷ *Philosophie und Kabbala*, p. 6.

⁷⁸ This is in contrast to the conception of the *Sohar*, which (at III, 204a) acknowledges a mystical meaning only of the holy language, but not of the language of other peoples.

which was situated on my head, and what was on my head became precise—that is until two languages emerged from it (from the alterations in the combinations of the name) which came to the aid of the Jewish tongue (Hebrew), namely Greek and Roman."⁷⁹ For, by a process of corruption, all languages have come into being from the sacred original, language, in which the world of names is directly set forth and explained, and because of this they are even more immediately associated with it.⁸⁰ Just as all language has its focus in the name of God, it can also be referred back to this focal point. As Abulafia says, the mystic re-smelts all languages and recasts them in the one holy language, with the result that he is fully aware in every series of words which he articulately utters that this utterance is composed of the 22 holy letters. The name of God is condensed from the movement and changing-ness of these letters, and this is accentuated by a very naturalistic comparison with the way butter is produced from the fast rotation of milk.⁸¹ A certain caution should be brought to bear in this respect, of course, because an unguided or falsely directed procedure of this "revolution of letters" can produce demonic and dangerous effects instead of spiritually mystic effects. The consequences of such false procedures in the undertakings of the *hokhmat ha-tseruf* are discussed more than once in Abulafia's writings.⁸² Satan appears instead of the name, and for Abulafia Satan clearly coincides with the spirit of unrestituted nature.

The actual "future world," the place of bliss, as is illustrated by a bold play of words, is the "world of letters," which is disclosed to the mystic in the *hokhmat ha-tseruf*.⁸³ The infinite wealth of this world of letters is evident: in fact we can even say that "each individual letter in the Kabbala is a world unto itself."⁸⁴ In a world such as this the letters, which in other

⁷⁹ *Sefer ha-'oth*, ed. Jellinek, in the "Jubelschrift zum 70. Geburtstag von H. Gratz," 1887, p. 71.

⁸⁰ Thus expressed in the foreword to Abulafia's *Mafteasch ha-chochmoth*, Ms. Parma de Rossi, 141, fol. 3a.

⁸¹ *Philosophie und Kabbala* p. 20.

⁸² *Ibid.* As well as in his *Chajjei ha'-olem ha-ba*, cf. the relative passages from this, in my catalogue of the Kabbalistic manuscripts in Jerusalem, 1930, pp 25-26.

⁸³ *Imrei Shefer*, Ms. Munich 285, fol. 75b.

⁸⁴ *Sefer ha-meliz*, Ms. Munich, 285, fol. 10. Similarly in *Sohar I*, 4b, it reads in connection with Isaiah 51:16: "I make my words in your mouth," the new and authentic word, which man speaks in the Torah, is before God, who kisses

respects are conceived of as forms and mysterious signs, form for their part the substance, which itself always remains the same throughout the movements of the letters which inter-connect with one another. Here the forms are now the meanings—the former sense—which the observer can attribute to these combinations in accordance with the degree of his intellectual faculty of knowledge. The letters are thus the substance and form of the intellectual world, each one in accordance with the different perspectives in which it is regarded. In addition to this a sense resides in those combinations, which for us, with our limited power of understanding, have no connection with any palpable meaning. This sense comes from the total complex of the world, and it will become palpable, be it by a progress in understanding, or be it by Messianic enlightenment and change. In this way Abulafia was able to refer back to the mystical and incomprehensible divine names of those ancient Merkaba writings, of which, some mention was made at the beginning of this paper.⁸⁵ They form still undeveloped elements of meaning among those names, which, in their totality, determine the Torah as a *corpus mysticum*. Abulafia firmly establishes that the divine knowledge on the track of linguistic mysticism is superior to that which is on the track of the ten *Sefiroth*. The knowledge of the manifestation of God in his ten *Sefiroth* is of no more than propaedeutic value when compared with the fathoming of the mysteries of language, no matter how important it may be in itself.⁸⁴

At the conclusion of these observations Abulafia still finds himself constantly confronted by the question of the magical character of language. We started out with these considerations of the magic property of the word, and the name, and we have here pursued their metamorphoses in mysticism. But the overtones of magic are at our elbows in this respect. The consciousness of the immediate force which emanates from words, and how much more so from words which are refined to the utmost and apparently meaningless, but are nonetheless charged with meaning, is present in the mind of Abulafia in many instances through it and crowns it with seventy mystical crowns. And this word then extends in the movement to its own new world, a "new heaven and earth."

⁸⁵ *Philosophie und Kabbala*, p. 21.

⁸⁶ In the open letter published by Jellinek (*Auswahl kabbalistischer Mystik*, Book I, 1853) written by Abraham Abulafia to Barcelona, pp. 16-17.

out his writings. But in relation to any practicable magic and theurgy he adopts an attitude of complete rejection. He sees in this a thoroughly bad coarsening of a deeply spiritual kind of magic, which it would be quite unthinkable for him to deny. Magic does exist for him as that which is non-communicable, therefore as that which radiates from words. There is a dimension of profoundly intrinsic magic, which does not come under the interdiction of the magician, of practicable magic. Indeed it is this form of magic which is practised by the prophets. The "signs" which the prophets give in order to legitimize their transmission, coincide with this magic force within them.⁸⁷ Whoever permits himself, without this status, to intervene, in a so to speak technical manner, in the creation, or claims to be capable of such intervention, comes under the power of the temptations of mantic knowledge, that is of magic in the usual sense. The discipline of this, the "knowledge of demons" does not in fact dispense with the real fundamentals, but rather represents a falsification, because it is a coarsening of true mysticism which is directed at the purely outward.⁸⁸ Magic, in principle, is possible, but reprehensible, and the magician is accursed. He has assigned himself not to the Lord, *dominus*, but to the devil, *daemonas*.⁸⁹ For him, Satan is the material quality of nature,⁹⁰ and the Kabbalist, who refers it back to its spiritual foundation, dethrones him." As a result of his absorption in the name of God, the focus of all creation, he is endowed with the power "to reduce the power of the magician to nothing."⁹²

In conclusion, let me return once more to the central thought which we have tried to trace here. The name of God is the "essential name," which is the original source of all language. Every other name by which God can be called or invoked, is coincident with a determined activity, as is shown by the etymology of such biblical names; only this one name requires no kind of backward-looking reference to an activity, For the

⁸⁷ This thought is particularly developed at the end of *Or ha-sekhel*, fol. 67b.

⁸⁸ As in *Ner Elohim*, Ms. Munich 10, fol. 141b. The polemic against the creation of Golem is also pertinent here, fol. 172b.

⁸⁹ *Chajjei 'olam ha-ba*, Ms. Oxford, Neubauer 1646, fol. 205b.

⁹⁰ *Chajjei ha-nefesh*, Ms. Munich 408, fol. 53b.

⁹¹ Cf. the passage from *Chajjei 'olam ha-ba* in my catalogue of the Kabbalistic manuscripts, p. 29.

⁹² *Or ha-sekhel*, fol. 42b.

Kabbalists, this name has no "meaning" in the traditional understanding of the term. It has no concrete signification.⁹³ The meaninglessness of the name of God indicates its situation in the very central point of the revelation, at the basis of which it lies. Behind every revelation of a meaning in language, and, as the Kabbalists saw it, by means of the Torah, there exists this element which projects over and beyond meaning, but which in the first instance enables meaning to be given. It is this element which endows every other form of meaning, though it has no meaning itself. What we learn from creation and revelation, the word of God, is infinitely liable to interpretation, and it is reflected in our own language. Its radiation or sounds, which we catch, are not so much communications as appeals. That which has meaning—sense and form—is not this word itself, but the tradition behind this word, its communication and reflection in time. This tradition, which has its own dialectic, goes through certain changes and is eventually delivered in a soft, panting whisper; and there may be times, like our own, in which it can no longer be handed down, in which this tradition falls silent. This, then, is the great crisis of language in which we find ourselves. We are no longer able to grasp the last summit of that mystery that once dwelt in it. The fact that language can be spoken is, in the opinion of the Kabbalists, owed to the name, which is present in language. What the value and worth of language will be — the language from which God will have withdrawn—is the question which must be posed by those who still believe that they can hear the echo of the vanished word of the creation in the immanence of the world. This is a question to which, in our times, only the poets presumably have the answer. For poets do not share the doubt that most mystics have in regard to language. And poets have one link with the masters of the Kabbala, even when they reject Kabbalistic theological formulation as being still too emphatic. This link is their belief in language as an absolute, which is as if constantly flung open by dialectics. It is their belief in the mystery of language which has become audible.

⁹³ At the beginning here I have used the formulation of Cordovero in *Pardes Rimonim*, chap. 19, section. 1.