On Kabbalah and its Scholarship, On Terms and Definitions: A Response to Prof. Boaz Huss

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I am delighted to welcome to Doshisha my friend Prof. Boaz Huss and honored to share the present workshop with him. Many years have passed since the days when the two of us sat side by side at the feet of some of the illustrious professors of the Hebrew University, pouring over difficult Kabbalistic texts. Boaz went on to make the study of Kabbalah his field of expertise, becoming himself a leading authority in this academic discipline, while I went – regrettably, perhaps – in a different direction. I still try to follow the developments in his field, but by no means can I count myself an expert in it, and therefore my response today may not do justice to his arguments. Still, I will try to raise some questions for the sake of the ongoing academic discussion, with the hope of clarifying some points or initiating a fruitful debate.

1. Kabbalah in Modern Times

I would first like to ask Prof. Huss to clarify one point from his earlier public lecture. He said in his lecture that prior to the relatively recent surge of interest in it, "The central place of Kabbalah diminished in the modern period, and by the middle of the 20th century, only very small circles studied and practiced Kabbalah." However, in the past decade or so several scholars, including Prof. Huss, argued in their studies (some of which I will have cause to mention later) that the previous generations of academic scholars failed to study and to recognize the role of Kabbalah in the first half or so of the twentieth century, a role which may have been more substantial than realized so far. Prof. Huss was surely unable to delve into this question during his public lecture, but if possible I would ask him to clarify his position for us regarding the place of Kabbalah in the modern period prior to the recent and very exoteric surge.

2. Scholem's Legacy

Turning now to his workshop paper, Prof. Huss' main argument is that the designation "Jewish Mysticism" given to some writings and movements in Jewish history is misleading and better

avoided. He argues that "Mysticism in general and Jewish Mysticism in particular are modern, cultural dependent, discursive constructions". The constraint of time will not allow me to delve into the wider question of the definition of "mysticism", and I will limit my response to some of the aspects in the question of its Jewish manifestations. I'll say in advance that although I find great merit in our distinguished guest's approach to this issue, I must also disagree with some of his arguments.

Prof. Huss mentioned two major figures among those who gave rise to the definition "Jewish Mysticism". One was Martin Buber (1878-1965), whose books on Hasidism published in the first decade of the 20th century had a considerable impact on a wide readership, both Jewish and non-Jewish, and contributed significantly to creating a particular image of Hasidism and its teachings. However, Buber's academic career was not in the field of Jewish Mysticism, and the development of that academic discipline was not of his own doing; rather, it was created due to the efforts of a man who started as an admirer of Buber, but gradually grew disillusioned with his writings and methods and went his own independent way.

Gershom (Gerhard) Scholem (1897-1982) was born in Berlin, but soon after completing his academic studies immigrated to Jerusalem (then in Mandatory Palestine) in 1923, without any clear prospects, but out of a strong Zionist conviction in the possibility of Jewish spiritual renewal. When the Hebrew University was inaugurated in 1925 he was appointed a lecturer in Kabbalah – the first ever in any academic institution – later serving as a professor, until his retirement in 1966. He continued to publish his studies until his death, and his bibliography encompasses more than 600 items, including several dozen books. As indicated in Prof. Huss' paper, the founding of the academic study of Kabbalah is attributed to him personally, a unique and perhaps unprecedented achievement. As for "Jewish Mysticism" it is a term he undoubtedly used on certain occasions, but it seems to me that his attitude towards it was complicated and unequivocal.[1)] As far as he was concerned, he was a *historian* of *Kabbalah*.

For those unfamiliar with the field it might be difficult to grasp Scholem's lofty image and lasting impact. Due to his immense intellect he commanded such a towering figure that he could easily be considered intimidating. Naturally, every towering figure attracts detractors who wish to diminish it; however, the case of Scholem is distinct also in that respect: the attacks against his work soon after his death seemed so ferocious, that there was talk of patricide. It seemed to some that younger scholars were doing their best not only to challenge Scholem's arguments, but to demolish his image altogether, like sons who wish to obliterate their father from memory after taking his place. Indeed, the events and atmosphere at the Hebrew University in the decade after his death were so charged and passionate, that I always thought they deserved the attention of a good novelist, since the situation

went beyond normal academic dispute, entering the realm of the epic. Things may have quieted down to a considerable degree since then, but Scholem's legacy and scholars' attitudes towards it are still a vital and sometimes divisive issue.

Indeed, changes constantly occur in every academic discipline, and what is considered an undisputed certainty today, may lose all its appeal tomorrow. Scholem, of course, had his share of errors; he himself realized that like any academic achievement his work would be reexamined, reevaluated and found wanting. However, those who wish to tarnish his image and achievements often quote him selectively, putting too much emphasis on certain words while ignoring other points and miss the wider picture. And their alternative arguments are not always more convincing than his, as Prof. Huss may also admit (see, for example, his criticism of Moshe Idel in today's paper). Scholem's writings still constitute the foundation of the academic study of Kabbalah, which could not have been what it is today without his groundbreaking achievements.

Taking a step back and considering some of the developments in the field, we can see how the spirit of the times dictates the output of academic discourse. Scholem and his direct pupils were guided by the spirit of modernism, and were committed to philological, philosophical and sometimes theological thinking. This was reflected in the titles of their books, which suggested their emphasis on Kabbalah as theosophy. Consider, for example, the following titles, by a few of Scholem's direct pupils: Isaiah Tishbi, *The Doctrine of Evil and the Kelipah in Lurianic Kabbalah* (1942); Joseph Ben-Shlomo, *The Mystical Theology of Moses Cordovero* (1965); Rivka Schatz Uffenhimer, *Quitistic Elements in Eighteenth Century Hassidic Thought* (1968), and so on.

The early generation of scholars was followed by later ones, who came under the influence of postmodernism and of multiculturalism, and their new sensibilities are also reflected in the titles of their books. Their subject matter came to encompass wider, often external aspects of the Kabbalah, rather than focus on its theosophy, and their book titles, in the spirit of the times, became longer and double-headed, combined of a poetical main title followed by an explanatory sub-title; some examples: Melila Hellner-Eshed, *"And a River Flows from Eden": On the Language of Mystical Experience in the Zohar* (2005); Jonathan Garb, *"The Chosen will Become Herds": Studies in Twentieth Century Kabbalah* (2005); Jonatan Meir, *Rehovot ha-Nahar: Kabbalah and Exotericism in Jerusalem (1896-1948)* (2011). No doubt, much has changed over the years, as even this small but telling example reveals.

To conclude this *too* long part of my response I wish to ask Prof. Huss to comment on some of the recent developments in the study of Kabbalah as seen from his point of view in the center of the field, rather than from mine on its sidelines.

3. Orientalism

In his paper Prof. Huss referred briefly to the notion of Orientalism, saying: "The adoption of the modern category 'Mysticism' and its application to Jewish culture involved orientalist presuppositions that were connected with this category. The modern idea of mysticism emerged in an orientalist context, and was perceived as an essential feature of the 'Mystical East', whose past was valorized and its present disparaged. "

I must admit that I find this point difficult. First, perhaps like "Jewish Mysticism" itself, "Orientalism" too is a catch-phrase that became too all-embracing, vague and worn out from over-use. It is also charged with negative implications to a degree that makes it an automatic slander, and therefore best used with care. And secondly, even if we use it carefully and in its less-disputed nuances, thinking back on Scholem's oeuvre I cannot imagine how he could be blamed for having had an orientalist perspective, so I would ask Prof. Huss to clarify his intention in using this term in this context.

4. Possible Dangers & Disadvantages (including Theology)

In the final part of his paper Prof. Huss mentions what he perceives to be the dangers or disadvantages of the "Jewish Mysticism" classification, saying: "The classification of various texts and movements as Jewish Mysticism associates them with other cultural formations, both in Jewish culture and other cultures, to which they have no special connection, apart from the scholars' assumption that they are all based on mystical experiences. This assumption encourages the research and interpretation of unrelated historical phenomena as essentially connected, because of their supposedly mystical origin. On the other hand, the classification of these texts and movements as 'Mystical' detach them from other social arenas, which are significant for their understanding. As I have argued, the use of the category Mysticism involves a theological assumption that explains historical and social realities as products of encounters with the Divine, or transcendent reality. Such a theological assumption tends to differentiate between what is perceived as mystical phenomena, and other, historical, social and political structures and to encourage an ahistorical study of Kabbalah and Hasidism."

There are two issues here to which I would like to refer briefly. First, Prof. Huss is no doubt correct in arguing that the designation "Jewish Mysticism" can be problematic. However, the problems which worry him are not manifest in most of the academic studies with which I am familiar. As I said

earlier, I am not fully connected with the field, but the majority of the studies I happen to have read, mainly coming out of Israeli academic institutes, focus on the Kabbalah itself and do not deal with comparisons. Scholars of Kabbalah and Hasidism also seem mindful of the historical and social context of their subject matter, and do not give sole precedence to the "mystical" consideration. Perhaps this has to do with the fact that ever since Scholem himself the equivalent of "Jewish Mysticism" is not frequently used in Hebrew, in which it is more common to speak of *torat ha-sod* (esoteric teaching) or just *Kabbalah*, and these subjects are studied at Israeli universities as part of the departments of "Jewish Thought" (although from a different point of view this might be considered a limitation). I would like to hear Prof. Huss' opinion on this matter too.

Secondly, there is the "theological assumption"; here a distinction must be made between Buber, whose writings, or at least part of them, were manifestly theological, and Scholem, in whose many meticulous historical, biographical and bibliographical studies any theological intentions are rarely found. However, I wonder whether academic discourse should necessarily be detached from any "theological" points of view; in my opinion, as long as scholars make their method clear and do not obscure their motivation, their contributions should be evaluated on their merits and not be rejected on such grounds.

5. Definitions and Power

Finally, Prof. Huss argues: "In my opinion, Mysticism is not a universal, trans-historical, inherent religious phenomenon. Rather, it is a modern category which emerged in Western Europe and the United States in the 19th century, in the context of various ideological, theological and political interests of that period."

In fact, as he pointed out to me on a previous occasion, what he says about Mysticism is also being said nowadays about "Religion" in general. For example, Timothy Fitzgerald argued that "religion" is a modern concept developed in Western Europe and applied incorrectly to non-Western cultures. One of the examples he elaborated upon is Japan, where the term *shūkyō* and the notions associated with it may not have occurred before the Meiji Era. Fitzgerald and other like-minded scholars assume far-reaching cultural and economic consequences for the use of this term.[2] Still, will we be in a better place if we get rid of it altogether?

Most definitions, designations or classifications contain a degree of arbitrariness and can be constantly modified, revised or improved upon, but can also allow for better understanding of phenomena and are therefore useful. Certainly, terms should be handled with care and not taken for

granted, and their meaning may differ according to context or user.

In *Through the Looking Glass* Alice is surprised by Humpty Dumpty's insistence that "When *I* use a word […] it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you *can* make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master – that's all."[3)]

Who is the master, then? In one respect words and terms are our masters, since we cannot do without them, but in another, we are their masters, as we can juggle with their meaning and redefine what they signify, making them mean what we choose, or at least try to do so. Since we may each regard ouselves as masters, we end up constantly arguing over meaning. All-encompassing terms such as "Mysticism" or "Religion" can certainly be problematic, as demonstrated by Prof. Huss in his thought-provoking paper and by others in their studies, but before we discard them we should carefully consider their usefulness.

Appendix

Excerpts from Joseph Dan, "Gershom Scholem and the Study of Kabbalah at the Hebrew University", in: *On Gershom Scholem: Twelve Studies*, Jerusalem: Shazar (2010), pp. 41-42 - Translated from the Hebrew.

An important point that should be emphasized is the irrelevancy, during those first years [around 1925] of the term Mysticism, both in the description of Scholem's research work and his teaching at the university. There is a natural inclination, driven by the crystallization of ideas in a later period, to view Scholem's dealing with the Kabbalah as the solidifying of a specifically Jewish stream in the general field called Mysticism, just as the dealing with Jewish philosophy is the solidifying of a specifically Jewish stream in the general field called Philosophy. We have today a detailed description, based on Scholem's autobiography, his letters and diaries, demonstrating clearly Scholem's path to specializing in the Kabbalah, of all things. It turns out that the main factor sending Scholem on the path he walked his whole life was his rebelliousness against the conventions of the surrounding society and against the way Jewish Studies were conducted at the time. Scholem turned to Kabbalah in the framework of his turning to Judaism: just as he chose Judaism, which was rejected and despised in his family and social environment, so he chose the Kabbalah, which was rejected and despised in the Judaism upon which he set his heart. That rebellion, which characterizes Scholem's youth and young adulthood, was the guiding measure for his actions in every matter: he was one of the few and the isolated who refused to be carried away (when he was merely seventeen) by the all-engulfing

wave of German nationalism at the breaking of the First World War; he crystallized an oppositional standpoint towards his leaders and teachers in the German Zionist Movement – and particularly towards his mentor and friend Martin Buber – once they adopted, after some initial hesitations, loyalty to what was called in the German propaganda "a war that was imposed on Germany"; thus they were confronting their Zionist brethren in France and England, who joined their countries' war effort against Germany. Scholem chose to evade service in the German army by pretending madness, refusing to submit to the conventions of the surrounding society. Similarly he rebelled against the systematic assimilation typical to his family and chose Judaism – including the study of Hebrew, something only a few others of his generation and background thought to do. He did not turn to Modern Hebrew but first and foremost to the Jewish sources – the Talmud and Midrash – although it was not easy to find someone to teach him those subjects. Later, when his Jewish and Zionist identification reached maturity, he chose to do what other Jews and Zionist did not even consider: immigrate to Palestine, although he was not persecuted and was not constrained in his Berlin bourgeois milieu. Scholem's letters and diaries, his conversations with Walter Benjamin and their correspondence, testify clearly to Scholem's extremely wide intellectual interests in philosophy and politics, in linguistics and the history of religion [as well as mathematics and other sciences]; but he did not show any special interest in mysticism. The assumption that he was drawn towards mysticism and hence to Jewish mysticism has no expression in the rich material in our possession. Scholem chose the Kabbalah because it was a neglected, remote and despised area inside the world of the Judaism he adopted.

[Later in his article (p. 48) Dan refers to Scholem's famous book, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, published in English in 1941, the first few pages of which deal with the essence of mysticism and its position in the history of religions, adding in a footnote:]

It is an interesting fact that Scholem's generalizations appearing in those pages were not repeated in his other writings; his attitude towards that book was one of reservation (he forbade its translation into Hebrew). It is possible to argue that it was an attempt to create a historical generalization regarding mysticism, but he himself was not proud of it and did not repeat it in his writings in the following forty years or more.

Notes

1) He used it in English, but less often in Hebrew. I cannot elaborate here, but see the appended paragraphs translated from an article by Joseph Dan.
2) Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (Oxford University Press, 2000).
3) Lewis Carroll & Martin Gardner, *The Annotated Alice: Alice's Adventures in Wonderland & Through the Looking Glass* (Penguin Books, 1970), 269.