

BOOK REVIEWS

MOSHE IDEL, *Messianic Mystics* (Yale University Press, 2000), 608 pp., \$40.

Kabbalah, Judaism's ancient esoteric lore, has traditionally been concealed by the rabbis from all but a tiny elite of deeply learned mystics. The Rabbinic insistence on protecting kabbalistic teachings from exposure to the Jewish masses was rooted in the fear of its awesome powers and the potential for their dangerous abuses by those not properly trained in this most recondite of Judaic disciplines. Many of the medieval Jewish legal codes legislated against reading kabbalistic texts before reaching a minimum age (usually forty) and mastering the Talmud.

The wisdom of this Rabbinic reticence toward the popularization of the kabbalah is confirmed by the recent emergence of numerous mystical charlatans who are peddling a deeply distorted version of Judaism's most profound spiritual teachings to rich and famous Jews and non-Jews, from rock singers to Hollywood stars. The most dangerous of these trendy purveyors of "Jewish mysticism" is the Kabbalah Learning Centre, an organization whose goal is to transform kabbalah from esoteric theosophical teachings into a vehicle for New Age healing. Among the many rewards promised by the Kabbalah Centre's advertising are learning how to talk to angels, finding out about UFOs, mastering the arts of palm and face reading, and curing anger, depression, headaches, guilt, fatigue, diabetes, ulcers, and even cancer.

In light of the contemporary abuses of kabbalistic learning, the erudite studies by the prolific Israeli scholar Moshe Idel are a reassuring reminder of the real seriousness, breadth, and profundity of Jewish mysticism. Mr. Idel is the most renowned in a very small circle of contemporary Jewish scholars engaged in the serious academic examination of kabbalistic literature. (In this country, the leading critical scholar of kabbalah is New York University's Elliot Wolfson, whose writings have not received nearly the attention they deserve.) Since 1988, when Mr. Idel published his trailblazing revision of ear-

lier kabbalistic scholarship, *Kabbala: New Perspectives* (Yale), he has dedicated himself to overturning the legacy of the founder of the academic study of Jewish mysticism, Gershom Scholem (1897-1982). In *Messianic Mystics*, the most recent and most problematic offensive in Mr. Idel's sustained battle against what he calls "the Scholemian establishment," he endeavors to refute Scholem's influential interpretations of Jewish messianism.

Scholem's approach to kabbalah was largely historical, relying heavily on the careful analysis of primary texts. Reacting to the contemptuous neglect of kabbalah on the part of earlier generations of German Judaica scholars who, mainly for apologetic reasons, sought to present Judaism exclusively as a rational religion, Scholem dedicated his life to the study and elucidation of the anti-rational mystical tradition in Judaism. He uncovered a lost and vast body of theosophical and mystical Hebrew writings and, virtually *ex nihilo*, charted a map of the history of kabbalistic thought. During a forty-year tenure as professor of Jewish mysticism at Hebrew University, Scholem raised a new generation of kabbalistic scholars who have produced hundreds of books and articles on various aspects of Jewish messianism, most of which expand upon the academic legacy of their teacher.

Like most pioneers of an entire field of study, Scholem sometimes glossed over texts and ideas that did not quite fit his grand scheme of kabbalistic lore. He was, for example, far more interested in the historical development of broad theosophical and theurgic trends than in the subjective mystical experiences of individual kabbalists. Mr. Idel's great contribution to the further study of kabbalah has been in widening and complicating the field by considering a variety of mystical phenomena ignored by Scholem. With his remarkable erudition in the vast literature of kabbalah—including some obscure works and manuscripts of which even Scholem was unaware—Mr. Idel has introduced students of Jewish mysticism to many paradigms of kabbalism not fully treated by Scholem, such as ecstatic mystical experience, magical practices, and oral traditions not found in the classical literature. He has challenged what he considers Scholem's excessive reliance on the philological and historical analysis of texts and has endeavored to paint a largely ahistorical (some would say anti-historicist) and complex phenomenology of kabbalah that incorporates the subconscious and paranormal experiences of obscure Jewish mystics not included in Scholem's work.

Despite his undeniable contributions to our understanding of the variety of mystical traditions in Judaism, Mr. Idel has had many detractors since the start of his career. With the appearance of his first major works more than a decade ago, there was a sense that Mr. Idel was overly driven to debunk Scholem and establish himself as the greatest kabbalistic scholar of all time. A particularly acerbic polemical exchange between Mr. Idel and the great authority on the Zohar, the late Isaiah Tishby, appeared several years ago in an influential Israeli journal of Jewish studies. Tishby felt that, in his quest to usurp Scholem's throne, Mr. Idel deliberately oversimplified his work and ignored the important original contributions of other scholars of the earlier generation, such as Efraim Gottlieb, whose findings Mr. Idel often claimed as his own. Sadly, with each new publication by Mr. Idel, Tishby's suspicions gain increased credibility. In this latest book, Mr. Idel's obsession with overturning Scholem has resulted in an exaggerated and distorted reconstruction of Jewish messianism that confuses and obscures far more than it adds to our understanding of the topic.

While the details of Mr. Idel's elaborate critique of Scholem are far too technical to elucidate here, the dispute is essentially about the very definition of Jewish messianism. Consistent with his approach in his previous books, Mr. Idel insists that there is no single, monolithic messianic idea. Rather, messianism includes a variety of mystical experiences of individual kabbalists. Mr. Idel speaks of diverse non-apocalyptic, non-eschatological, ahistorical, and personal forms of messianism. He argues that, "by both mysticism and messianism I refer to a variety of experiences and self-conceptions of the Messiahs themselves and much less to their followers' perception of their role."

The problem with this is that the messianic hope of the Jews has always been understood as a collective experience located at "the end of days" and intricately tied to the ingathering of the exiles and rebuilding of Zion. Jewish messianism is distinguished from messianic impulses found in other religious traditions—Christianity in particular—precisely because it is so intimately wed to Jewish national destiny. Scholem understood this very well, as his interest in kabbalistic messianism was clearly related to his Zionism. Scholem's emphasis on mysticism in the history of Judaism was his unique contribution to the general Zionist rejection of the purely halakhic, Rabbinic Judaism associated with exile. Unlike Rabbinic Judaism, which was perceived to be stale and legalistic, mysticism was an exciting,

dynamic and potentially revolutionary force within Judaism. In particular, Scholem saw in kabbalistic messianism a model for Zionist utopianism. For Scholem, the messianic impulse in Judaism was a national-historical phenomenon that always harbored a potentially subversive, antinomian element, and Zionism was the latest, secularized manifestation of that ancient redemptive impulse.

Mr. Idel, who emigrated from Romania in 1957 to an established, militarized state of Israel, did not feel the need to justify Zionism with Jewish messianism. Unlike Scholem, who was a pioneer not only of kabbalistic scholarship but also of the establishment of the Hebrew University and the Jewish state, Mr. Idel rejects the political uses of Jewish history to justify the Zionist idea, as do most Israelis of his generation. Although Mr. Idel is operating in a highly esoteric field, his revision of earlier kabbalistic scholarship is not entirely unrelated to the widespread revision of the history of Zionism now taking place throughout the Israeli academic community. Mr. Idel's inclusion of ahistorical, personal redemptive experiences in the category of messianism is nothing less than a total revision of the fundamental meaning of messianic redemption as it has been so clearly understood by Jews for millennia. In Mr. Idel's conception, there is hardly any distinction between ultimate mystical experiences and messianism.

Many of the so-called messiahs that he portrays in this book were recluses with no following whatsoever. This does not seem to deter Mr. Idel, who boldly redefines messianism as "a state of being . . . not relegated to the distant future but attainable in the here-and-now." But, of course, a redemptive or mystical "state of being" is, at best, pre-messianic and then only so if it leads directly to some form of apocalyptic speculation or activism. Mr. Idel is willing to categorize descriptions of individual mystics' subjective sense of personal redemption as messianic even though they were never actualized in millenarian form; that is, psychological complexes never transformed from the private domain of ecstatic experience into any sort of collective messianic expectations or activities. The problem with this approach is that an individual who privately harbors a messianic complex is no more a messiah than someone suffering from a Napoleon complex is the ruler of Europe.

Aside from this fundamental problem in Mr. Idel's conception of messianism, there are numerous weaknesses in his scholarly methodology. In his fervent desire to break away from Scholem's reliance

on a careful reading of texts, Mr. Idel speculates—often wildly—about alleged messianic phenomena based on mere isolated appearances of the word *mashiakh* in redemptive mystical writings. As in his previous books, Mr. Idel assumes that a variety of beliefs and intellectual influences exist without clear literary documentation to support his claim. In that sense his work is part of the disturbing academic trend of poststructuralism, which rejects the attempt to establish the determinate meaning of historical documents and texts.

Perhaps the greatest irony about Mr. Idel's writings is the degree to which his own erudition sabotages both the clarity of his writing and the cogency of his arguments. His style is ponderous and laden with terminology of his own invention, and I cannot help but wonder whether decades of delving into cryptic, esoteric literature have compromised his literary skills. Let us consider Mr. Idel's attempt to clarify the differences between Scholem's and his own methodologies. Scholem's approach is termed by Mr. Idel "monochromatic diachronism." Of his own approach he says, "I propose to call this approach synchronic polychromatism." For the confused reader, there follows this sentence: "Synchronic polychromatism, as well as the diachronic one, should be organized into more unified diachronic conceptual schemes." And who can disagree with that?

Finally, Mr. Idel often seems to forget that his vast knowledge of hundreds of obscure texts and manuscripts was not matched by the mystics whom he studies, men who had no access to computerized library catalogues and archival collections. Yet Mr. Idel operates under the assumption that everything that he has read was known to all kabbalistic authors. Thus the recurrence of a word or phrase in two different works allows Mr. Idel to claim influence, even if the writings in question are separated by many centuries and lands.

If he continues to publish books like *Messianic Mystics*, Moshe Idel's legacy will be the tragic one of a great scholar whose contribution to Jewish learning was undermined by his obsession with Gershom Scholem and his inability to extricate himself from the deep obscurities of his subject.

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