Nuovo Giornale di Filosofia della Religione
Nuova Serie, N. 3/2023, pp. 52-78
ISSN: 2532-1676

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IDOLATROUS DRIVES IN KABBALISTIC IMAGINARY? ON THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE «ASSEMBLY OF ISRAEL» AS A DIVINE ENTITY

Abstract

Elliot R. Wolfson has detected in the kabbalistic tradition an «impulse for idolatry», and has examined some of its major forms. In a critical dialogue with Wolfson's views, the present inquiry attempts to discern other aspects of the kabbalistic imaginary (especially found in the theosophical literature gravitating around the Zoharic corpus), which might indeed be seen as vehicles of idolatrous drives. It focuses, in particular, on long-term patterns structuring the discourse and practice of Jewish mystical circles, where determined ancient symbols or icons – such as the «Assembly of Israel» – came to be hypostasized, projected in heaven, and charged with supernal qualities. Hence, for instance, the people of Israel could appear as a part of the divinity, somehow linked or coinciding with the immanent or the feminine side of the divine realm.

Keywords: Idolatry, Kabbalah, Knesset Yisra'el, Shekhinah, Imaginary, Worship

Sommario

Elliot R. Wolfson ha individuato nella letteratura cabbalistica un «impulso all'idolatria», esaminando alcune forme di questo impulso. In un dialogo critico con le tesi di Wolfson, questo articolo tenta di rintracciare altri aspetti dell'immaginario cabbalistico (specialmente presenti nella letteratura teosofica che gravita intorno al corpus zoharico), i quali potrebbero essere effettivamente considerati veicoli di vettori idolatrici. In particolare, si sofferma su alcuni schemi di lungo periodo che strutturano il discorso e la pratica di circoli mistici all'interno dell'ebraismo, in cui determinati

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simboli o icone – come l'«Assemblea di Israele» – vengono ipostatizzati, proiettati in cielo e caricati di qualità supreme. Così, ad esempio, la comunità d'Israele poté apparire come parte del divino, in qualche modo connessa o coincidente con il lato immanente o femminile della realtà divina.

Parole chiave: Idolatria, Kabbalah, Assemblea di Israele, Shekhinah, Immaginario, Culto

1. *On Wolfson's detection of an idolatrous pulsion in Kabbalah*

Dealing with the phenomenon of idolatry, scholars have often observed the tendency of religious cultures to reify, sanctify and absolutize a special sign, not only making it an image of God, but transforming that "image" from an "icon" to an "idol". One might argue that this process pertains to practically any religion, and evidence of this can be indeed detected in all cultural universes. Even assuming that theoretically one can distinguish between icon and idol,[1] human discourse and experience seem to blend the borders between them continually. The fact is that any religious language that strives to speak of the divine and create the conditions for an encounter with the divine, risks becoming "idolatrous".[2] Of course, an emic approach will hardly admit the presence of idol worship in its own cultural universe. "Idolatry" usually is the religion of the others (as much as "magic" coincides with the religious practice of the others).[3]

[1] See e.g. the theological-phenomenological reflections by J.L. Marion.

[2] The perception of this risk is especially acute among those who assume God as the "totally other" (transcendent, inaccessible, invisible, unutterable, etc.). A rigorous philosophical monotheism cannot but view as ultimately idolatrous any attempt at representing God by means of non-verbal or verbal images, since pictorial or linguistic signs unavoidably end up "relativizing the Absolute" or "absolutizing the non-absolute". On the other hand, it has become evident that the removal of all images and signs in a purely apophatic perspective might make religion unfeasible. See G. FREUDENTHAL, *No Religion Without Idolatry: Mendelssohn's Jewish Enlightenment*, Notre Dame UP, Notre Dame 2012; E.R. Wolfson, *Imagination, Theolatry, and the Compulsion to Worship the Invisible* (lecture available on Internet, 2016), pp. 77-9.

[3] As known, idol worship is designed in rabbinic terms *'avodah zarah*, which literally means «foreign [or, strange] cult». As a fundamental introduction to this issue in Judaism, see M. HALBERTAL - A. MARGALIT, *Idolatry*, Cambridge UP, Cambridge Mass. 1992. A main and compelling assumption of the authors is that there are many possible meanings of "idolatry", since «different concepts of God create, when reversed, different concepts of idolatry» (ibi, pp. 1, 199, 236).

It is then noteworthy that around the turn of this century, in a series of important publications, the Jewish American scholar Elliot R. Wolfson confronted straightforwardly the «idolatrous impulse» found in Judaism (classically described as the anti-idolatrous religion par excellence), recognizing its force especially in the form of Jewish mysticism called Kabbalah, which exploded during the 13th century. In the Middle Ages, Wolfson argued, this impulse no longer had to do with the worship of natural trees or artificial images of the deity, as was in the remote history of Israel. Rather, it concerned the «figural envisioning of the divine – and especially the configuration of God in anthropomorphic terms». Such aspiration to visualize God in one's heart or mind could generate different shapes of the divine. In Wolfson's opinion, the most important of them was that of the sacred text – given the fundamental propensity of the kabbalists towards a «reification of Torah as an iconic object of visual contemplation».[4]

Indeed, the kabbalistic tradition – perhaps more than any other kind of Judaism – appears to be engaged in an inner incessant struggle between the belief in a unique and imageless God and the compulsion to envision and experience the divine in articulated forms, namely between the fundamental "prohibition of images" and the ongoing production of imaginative discourses on a multidimensional deity – a somewhat irreducible tension that gave light to diverging expressions, complicated strategies, and conflicting stances.

Wolfson has had the merit to explore this delicate issue without traditional biases, analyzing its subtle folds in different segments of Jewish literature through sophisticated views and methodologies (as is typical of all his phenomenological and textual studies). Yet, I have the impression that his approach presents some shortcomings. I wish to focus here in particular on his attempt to decipher in the entire kabbalistic corpus a uniform theoretical stance, conceptually coherent, able to "solve" the bundle of issues related to the impulse for idolatry. This stance would allow to avoid, on the one hand, the naïve realism of representing God in anthropomorphic (or similar) images, and, on the other, the docetic nominalism of those who reject all images of God. Such speculative solution, inspired by Henry Corbin's discussion on the medieval Islamic philosophy of Ibn

[4] See E.R. WOLFSON, *Iconicity of the Text: Reification of the Torah and the Idolatrous Impulse of Zoharic Kabbalah*, «Jewish Studies Quarterly» 11, 2004, pp. 3-4. See also his *The Body in the Text: A Kabbalistic Theory of Embodiment*, «The Jewish Quarterly Review» 95, 3, 2005, pp. 479-500.

Arabi and further nurtured by contemporary philosophy,[5] would lie in «the ascription of an imaginal body to God».[6] It presumes that the visual apprehension of the kabbalist was «symbolic» and attained by «the faculty of imagination», completely extraneous to sensory aspects, and paradoxically gained through «negation of the physical body»[7] (although, as Wolfson himself underlines, it occurred along the traditional cultic path, which obviously involved bodily limbs and engaged corporeal and emotional sides[8]). Furthermore, as said, the «imaginal body of God» envisioned by the mystic was in fact a purely linguistic construct, finally coinciding with the letters of the divine Name, namely with the Torah (although, as Wolfson acknowledges, these linguistic items could in turn assume anthropomorphic shapes[9]).

I suspect that such comprehensive conceptual formulation might turn out to be too sharp and monolithic when confronted with the extremely various, magmatic and elusive discourses of the kabbalistic tradition, and

[5] Considered as a whole, Wolfson's work appears as increasingly imbued by philosophical reflections, and ever more concerned with theoretical constructs and linguistic paradoxes, in the effort to produce an original speculative and poetic path – somehow in dialogue with the kabbalistic production. Emblematic is his lecture quoted in n. 2.

[6] See e.g. *Iconicity*, cit., p. 4, n. 12: «the notion of the imaginal body […] offers a way to get beyond the dichotomy of allegorical removing the force of the anthropomorphic speculations, on the one hand, and naively accepting them at face value, on the other». Such solution, already sketched by Wolfson in *Through a Speculum that Shines* (1994), was further developed in his *Language, Eros, Being* (2005).

[7] «From the kabbalists' perspective, the divine anthropos is a symbolic image envisioned within the imaginative faculty» (*Iconicity*, cit., p. 4); «the ascetic negation of the physical body allows for the ocular apprehension of God's imaginal body» (ibi, p. 14)

[8] As in Corbin's approach to Sufi literature, Wolfson collocates the kabbalistic experience in a *mundus imaginalis*, a median reality between sensible and intelligible forms. Yet, the attribution of such perspicuous tridimensional ontology to kabbalistic authors seems to be questionable – as much as the positing of a theoretical sharp boundary between imagination and more corporeal domains of experience (does it replace the classical dualism mind-body?). Indeed, for instance, when dealing with ritual action, the kabbalists stress the importance and power of the sensory pole, with its material-causal connections – whence the capacity of pious Jews to handle with physical limbs and objects that reflect the upper realities and have a concrete influence on them. See M. MOTTOLESE, *Bodily Rituals in Jewish Mysticism*, Cherub Press, Los Angeles 2016. On the deep oscillations concerning body and materiality, see below, n. 21.

[9] See *Iconicity*, cit., pp. 9-10. Wolfson often refers to the confluence of linguistic symbolism and anthropomorphic imagery.

might lose something of the plural and often contradictory stances that emerge from that huge textual corpus. In this paper, I shall contend in particular that Wolfson's account focuses on one aspect of the Jewish impulse for idolatry (that related to the mental visualization of the one God), while it underestimates other leanings of the kabbalistic discourse, such as the propensity to produce hypostatization of mediatory figures, and to view human beings as merging with those supernal entities. In ultimate analysis, that sophisticated "compromise solution" might lead to marginalizing or neglecting some radical aspects of the kabbalistic language – those referring for instance to a very "splitting" of the supreme unity, to an "incorporation" of the divine into cosmic or earthly elements, to an "ascension" of lower realities into higher spheres, or to a "concrete determination" (of magical or theurgical kind) by the former on the latter. It was precisely in relation to these stances that an acute awareness of the dangers connected to the idolatrous impulse developed – both in Jewish contexts polemicizing with mystical trends and within the same kabbalistic world.

In the following pages, exploring the so-called "theosophical-theurgical" literature (especially, that vast cultural setting whose organization of knowledge gravitated around the Zoharic texts), we shall dwell on an imaginative process that makes the distinction between iconic representation of the divine and idolatrous hypostatization very tenuous.[10] I refer to the tendency to reify and sacralize human beings – primarily, the «people of Israel» –, charging them with supernal features, and making them capable of embodying the divine or cleaving to supreme dimensions.[11] This stance parallels, and sometimes intersects, similar phenomena concerning linguistic items and textual bodies, like the Hebrew letters, the divine Name, or the holy Scripture.[12] Some striking discursive formulations to be analyzed

[10] On the "ambivalence of the images" that characterizes the mythical language of Jewish mystics, see below, at the end of this article.

[11] As we shall see, in a vast and remarkable book redacted in those very years (*Venturing Beyond. Law and Morality in Kabbalistic Mysticism*, Oxford UP, New York 2006), Wolfson investigated the ontologization of the Jewish social group, and of its particular ethos, activated by the kabbalistic (mainly Zoharic) tradition, which went so far as to see Israel as the «earthly incarnation of the imaginal body of God» (see e.g. pp. 40, 110). Yet, in that inquiry Wolfson did not discuss the inner, at least potential, idolatrous drive related to this process, and limited himself to examining the open Zoharic condemnation of external forms of idolatry (especially pertinent to the Christian world or, in less measure, to the Islamic world).

[12] As said before (n. 4), Wolfson's analysis deals at length with the processes of idealization of Torah or other linguistic aspects, also hinting at their potential danger.

below – «man is part of the supernal divinity», «Israel is the *Shekhinah* really», or «God, the Torah, and Israel are one» – appear to express a marked inclination towards divinization of the image, which might also entail some sort of image worship. We shall touch, but only cursorily, other idolatrous drives also tied to the mythical language of the kabbalists, such as the projection in the supernal spheres of demonic and impure forces, and the connection with them through ritual practices.

2. *Discursive patterns on Israel and the celestial realm*

It is barely necessary to recall the ancient Jewish mythologoumena about the humanlike image of God (anthropomorphosis = God in *imago hominis*) and the divine-like image of man (theomorphosis = man in *imago Dei*).[13] Throughout their history, Jews could hardly remove or sublimate the remote inner pulsion to attribute to God corporeal forms and limbs resembling those of human beings. At the same time, they continued to take the biblical account of a man created in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1, 26) very seriously. Albeit distinct, the two issues were unceasingly interlaced. After the destruction of the Temple (the sacred place, the locus of divine immanence in space), the human being certainly played the role of main surrogate of the Sanctuary and major theophoric image. The indwelling presence of God in the mundane sphere was primarily related to human shapes or deeds. Rabbinic authorities even looked at man as an «expansion of the image» of the deity, and consequently endowed with supreme value the prescription of procreation, or the prohibition of murdering (or wasting seed).[14]

The medieval kabbalists went on elaborating this millennial imagery.[15] In their view, the human «building» – in its corporeal articulations, in its spiritual qualities, in its verbal or nonverbal acts – was essentially an icon of God. In particular, the human soul appeared as directly emanated from the supernal pleroma of the ten *sefirot* and sharing with it divine attributes,

However, in the end, his speculative formulations – roughly summarized before – tend to minimize the pluralizing and idolatrous implications of those processes. See also below, notes 81, 85, 86.

[13] See most recently F. STAVRAKOPOULOU, *God. An Anatomy*, Pan MacMillan, 2021.

[14] See Y. LORBERBAUM, *In God's Image: Myth, Theology and Law in Classical Judaism*, Cambridge UP, New York 2015.

[15] On anthropomorphic views of the divine diffuse in Kabbalah, see M. IDEL's collected essays, *Representing God*, Brill, Leiden - Boston 2014, and numerous inquiries by E.R. WOLFSON (*Through a Speculum that Shines*; *Images of God's Feet*, etc.).

such as immortality.[16] The theosophical discourse of the kabbalists extolled humanity in general, even stating that «man is part of the supernal divinity».[17] On this backdrop, however, the people of Israel occupied a very special position. Wolfson has demonstrated that, as kabbalistic sources relate to the divine or theophoric nature of «man», they usually refer to the Israelites, their ontological status of supreme rank, their central role in the cosmic order, their formidable power on reality and history.[18] Let me sketch here some basic lines of this "social imaginary", which – already consolidated in the 13th-century kabbalistic literature – was to remain a main cultural factor in the subsequent centuries.

Israel as a whole has a «divine soul», which originates in the third divine dimension (the *sefirah* called *Binah*, «Understanding»[19]). The holy and pure souls of the Israelites come all from there, and yearn to draw back to that primordial root (also called *Teshuvah*, «Return»). They are indeed defined as «a part of the essence» of God, endowed with «unity, eternity and attachment [to the divine]».[20] In fact, they lie in bodily limbs that are material and lower (although these too have some analogy with the upper limbs of

[16] See M. IDEL, *Nishmat eloha. On the Divinity of the Soul in Nahmanides and His School*, in S. ARZY - M. FACHLER - B. KAHANA (eds.), *Life as a Midrash*, Yediot Ahronot, Tel Aviv 2004. The notion of the divinity and eternity of the soul was then recovered and elaborated by 16th-century Sephardi sages living in the Ottoman Empire, such as Meir ibn Gabbay, Yitzhaq Adarbi, Shlomo Alqabetz, or Moshe Cordovero.

[17] MOSHE CORDOVERO, *Pardes rimmonim*, *Sha'ar* 32, 1, f. 78a. Cordovero's work has been described as representative of an «immanentist theology». In the essay mentioned in the previous note, Idel shows how in general the kabbalistic emanative views indeed demolish any sharp dichotomy between Creator and creation (more specifically, the human being). Analogously, M. Fishbane has described the kabbalistic myth as the re-emergence of «a consubstantial unity among God and man and world» (M. FISHBANE, *Israel and the "Mothers"*, in Id., *The Garments of Torah*, Indiana UP, Bloomington 1989, p. 62).

[18] See WOLFSON, *Venturing Beyond*, cit.

[19] On *Binah* as the upper and active female aspect of the divine (the «supernal *Shekhinah*», the «supernal mother»), see G. SCHOLEM, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead*, Schocken, New York 1991, pp. 174ff.

[20] On these statements in Yitzhaq Adarbi's sermons, see B. SACK, *In the Gates of the Kabbalah of R. Moshe Cordovero*, Ben Gurion University, Beer Sheva 1995, pp. 103-4. The idea that Israel's souls partake of divinity is developed by numerous kabbalists while commenting the famous passage of *Pirqei Avot* that attests that «beloved are Israel, in that they were called sons to the Place [God]»: compare for example the commentaries by the Moroccan kabbalists Ya'aqov Ifargan and Avraham Azulay (first half of the 17th century). The «consubstantiality with the divine» therefore concerns the people of Israel primarily, and «grounds their election»: see R. GOETSCHEL, *Meir ibn Gabbay*, Peeters, Louvain 1981, p. 450.

the Godhead).[21] By keeping the divine law and performing the correct acts – namely, observing the cultic system of precepts and prayers inherited from their ancestors –, the people of Israel have the chance to turn back to their source, cleaving to the supreme layers of reality. What emerges then from most kabbalistic sources is that the divine origin and destination of man pertain in particular to the Jews.[22]

Israel is further and decisively associated to the tenth and last dimension of the divine pleroma (the *sefirah* called *Malkhut*, «Reign»). Such an association has an ancient and intricate prehistory, which I shall try to summarize shortly. Rabbinic texts often employed the collective term «Assembly of Israel» (*Knesset Yisra'el*) – a sort of personification of the Jews as an ethnic-religious whole. On the other hand, they often referred to the condescendence or inhabitation of the divinity on earth (*Shekhinah*): they considered this immanent side of God as having dwelled in the major holy places of Israel's mythical past (the Tabernacle, the Temple), while the present time was characterized by the «exile of the *Shekhinah*», destined to accompany the people of Israel along their historical diaspora.[23] This view of a (decentered but still concrete) dwelling of the *Shekhinah* among the Israelites, certainly favored the progressive overlapping of the two entities – the *Shekhinah* and the «Assembly of Israel» – which had to find its peak in the kabbalistic mythopoesis. A further ingredient in this imaginative construction was the growing autonomization and engenderment of the

[21] In kabbalistic literature, one finds plural and multifaceted views of the human body, partly extremely positive, partly extremely negative. Many sources however state that, when the human body is pure and holy, namely when it is engaged in the cultic service, it strongly imitates and influences the same divine forces and actions.

[22] This particularistic standing – stressing the special nature of the people of Israel – became the leading one in the theosophical literature of the late 13th century (see IDEL, *Nishmat eloha*, cit., pp. 379-80), and was expressed through more moderate or more extreme formulations. The latter usually implied a very negative attitude to the other peoples. A strong binary opposition between the «holy seed» (descending from a «holy root», a «stock of truth») and the «nations of the world» (stemming from an «impure root», «the root of the serpent», the «evil filth»), can be found for instance in *Zohar* 3, 14b, or in DAWID BEN YEHUDAH HE-HASID, *The Book of Mirrors. Sefer Mar'ot ha-Zove'ot*, ed. D. Matt, Scholars Press, Chico 1982, pp. 66-7. On such dominant dualistic view, linking the souls of the gentiles to a lower source or even to the «Other side» (*Sitra ahra*), see M. HALLAMISH, *The Relation of Kabbalah with the Nations of the World*, «Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought» 14, 1988, pp. 290ff., and WOLFSON, *Venturing Beyond*, cit.

[23] «Wherever Israel went into exile, the *Shekhinah*, as it were, went into exile with them»: *Mekhilta Pisha* 14; see also Talmud Bavli, *Megillah* 29a.

Shekhinah, perceived as a distinct female divine personality.[24] This process contributed to the hypostatization of Israel itself as a female supernal dimension.[25] It is then not surprising that, already in the early kabbalistic production, the last, liminal force of the sefirotic realm (*Malkhut*) not only coincides with a feminine divine entity (*Shekhinah*), but is often labeled as the «Assembly of Israel» (*Knesset Yisra'el*) – signaling an increasing interference of the two distinct concepts.[26]

A brief and organic account of the reflections on this divine aspect, is a desperate enterprise – first of all, because of the well-known absence of a stable ontology and cosmology among the kabbalists, which rather inclined to employ flexible and pluralistic imageries. Their texts display an extremely vast and variegated *imaginaire* of the last *sefirah*. The latter

[24] This development has been much discussed in scholarly research. According to classical reconstructions, in the canonic rabbinic literature there is no trace of distinction between God and the *Shekhinah*, which would be in fact only a designation of God's presence; only some early medieval texts testify a process of autonomization of the *Shekhinah*, which shall become a separate divine figure in the early Kabbalah (see SCHOLEM, *On the Mystical Shape*, cit., pp. 147-54; compare E. URBACH, *The Sages*, Harvard UP, Cambridge Mass. 1979, pp. 63-5). Different views have however emerged since then, pointing to a personification of the *Shekhinah* as a mediatory divine feminine already in pre-kabbalistic times – for some scholars in some connection with the flourishing of the Marian cult in Christianity, for other scholars as a resurgence of inner-Jewish earlier traditions (see e.g. respectively the studies of A. Green and P. Schaefer, C. Mopsik and M. Idel). For a nuanced description of the continuity with rabbinic sources, see Y. LIEBES, *De Natura Dei. On the Development of the Jewish Myth*, in Id., *Studies in Jewish Myth and Jewish Messianism*, State University of New York Press, Albany 1993, pp. 46ff.

[25] For a clear rabbinic representation of God as the «father» and the Community of Israel as the «mother», see e.g. Talmud Bavli, *Berakhot* 35b (a passage often recovered and reinterpreted by the kabbalists). According to Idel, several rabbinic texts allude to *Knesset Yisra'el* as a celestial female involved in a liaison with God – the possible residual or transformation of an ancient inner-Jewish «ditheism», which could in fact engage an array of feminine hypostases (see M. IDEL, *Kabbalah and Eros*, Yale UP, New Haven-London 2005, pp. 25ff.). On the root metaphor of the «marital relationship» between God and Israel, and the consequent understanding of idolatry as «betrayal», see HALBERTAL - MARGALIT, *Idolatry*, cit., chap. 1.

[26] Images of *Knesset Yisrael* as a divine hypostasis already emerge in one of the earliest kabbalistic documents: see *Sefer ha-Bahir* §§ 66, 67, 77, 171. On the kabbalistic intersection, and even identification, of the two rabbinic notions – *Shekhinah* and *Knesset Yisra'el* – see G. VAJDA, *Le commentaire d'Ezra de Gérone sur le Cantique des cantiques*, Aubier, Paris 1969, p. 327. See also the fundamental works of Scholem quoted below, n. 35, and Hallamish's summary: «the symbol of *Knesset Yisra'el* in kabbalistic literature is used for both the [elected] people and the divine presence, therefore a deep bond exists between them» (*The Relation*, cit., p. 295).

«comprises» as a «receptacle» all the upper divine forces, and at once borders the mundane spheres, having therefore the function of a major channel of communication between the supernal realm and the human world. Logically enough, it takes different connotations when named as *Malkhut, Shekhinah*, *Knesset Yisra'el*, *'Atarah* («Crown»), or any of its numerous other appellatives. In many cases, it exhibits an engendered and sexualized character. While usually feminized, *Shekhinah* can be described as «mother», as «daughter», or as «bride», «maiden», «spouse» or «queen».[27] Correspondingly, her links with the higher layers of the sefirotic Decade appear of manifold and very different kind, as much as her links with the human beings.[28] Such an *imaginaire* – frequently charged with erotic overtones[29] – supplies the figures at stake with distinct meanings and connotations. This fluidity is also due to the mutable kind of language employed by the kabbalists, switching continuously from metaphor to metonymy and myth. Thus, if in some passages *Knesset Yisra'el* appears as a metaphor, or just an epithet, of the tenth *sefirah*, in other texts it is the protagonist of realistic accounts and narratives that point to a strict relationship, or even identity, between the earthly «Assembly of Israel» and the heavenly feminine. In numerous occurrences, the kabbalists employ an earlier discursive strategy splitting two specular entities – "*Shekhinah* above" and "*Shekhinah* below", or "*Knesset Yisra'el* above" and "*Knesset Yisra'el* below"[30] –, yet also this overt refraction of the image into two (or more) ontic layers is usually functional to an account of the ramified relationship between the celestial and the terrestrial reality.[31]

[27] In their hermeneutics, the kabbalists continued to draw on the treasure of images contained in the Song of Songs. However, also other biblical passages – such as the prophetic ones identifying Sion and the mother (cf. Is 50, 1) or Israel and the wife (cf. Ez 16) – were of pivotal importance: see e.g. SCHOLEM, *On the Mystical Shape*, cit., p. 145. Idel has surmised a combination of the national-covenantal model of the prophets with the erotic *imaginaire* of the Canticle (see his *Kabbalah and Eros*, cit., pp. 18, 25-6, 138ff.).

[28] As Heschel noted, already in classical Judaism Israel's position in the relationship with the divine was very flexible, so that the «daughter» could assume the role of «mother» (Heschel downplayed the role of «wife»): see A.Y. HESCHEL, *God, Torah, and Israel*, in Id., *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, Farrar, New York 1996.

[29] An erotic *imaginaire* full of strongly carnal and sexual figurations, exploded in the Castilian Kabbalah, as it appears from the Zoharic corpus as well as from the literature closer to it (Yosef of Hamadan, etc.).

[30] A double *Shekhinah* already appears in the late midrashic work *Midrash Konen*, and in *Sefer ha-Bahir* (§ 171).

[31] See e.g. *Zohar* 1, 159b: «the *Shekhinah* above and below is comprised together, and everything is united at one and the same time».

The imagery of the theosophical Kabbalah appears strongly dynamic also because of the extreme mutability of the supernal realm in the diachronic dimension. Thus, the conformation of the female hypostasis and her relationship with the people of Israel, change radically in accordance with the various stages of the mythical history accounted by the kabbalists. This narrates that, after the primordial dramatic events causing the departure of the *Shekhinah* and the subversion of the cosmic order, the work of the Patriarchs was (partially) able to bring back the divine immanence and restore the world. The giving of the Torah at Sinai and the establishment of the Tent of meeting entailed the indwelling of the *Shekhinah* among Israel.[32] Since then, the manifestation of God and the maintenance of the world, depend primarily on the conduct of Israel, which holds a formidable cosmic and theurgic power through the fulfillment of prayers and precepts, despite the recurrent exilic situation.[33]

This brief survey had the sole purpose to highlight the pivotal position of Israel in the theosophical-theurgical imaginary of the most classical Kabbalah. Two main discursive constructs seem to stand out in this regard. On the one hand, bringing forth former processes of hypostatization, autonomization and personification of the immanent side of God, the kabbalists outline a vivid portrait of the *Shekhinah*, not only as a decisive intermediary between the upper dimensions of the deity and the created reality, but also as a female supernal personality standing alongside God Himself.[34] As Scholem noted, this «mythical hypostasis of the divine

[32] The covenantal bond obviously started with (Abraham's) circumcision and was strengthened through the (Mosaic) Torah. The people of Israel, «inscribed with the holy insignia on their flesh», were permitted as such to receive and learn Torah – and in this way God «ensconced *Shekhinah* among them» (*Zohar* 3, 72b-73a).

[33] On the motif of the «exile of the *Shekhinah*» in early kabbalistic literature, see J. BROWN, *On the Passionality of Exile in Medieval Kabbalah*, in M. COSTOYA (ed.), *Land of Stark Contrasts: Faith-Based Responses to Homelessness in the United States,* Fordham UP, New York 2021, pp. 250-74; in the Zoharic corpus, see I. TISHBY, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, Littman Library, London - Washington 1991, pp. 382-5; in early modern Kabbalah, see B. SACK, *The Exile of Israel and the Exile of the Shekhinah in Or Yaqar by R. Moshe Cordovero*, in «Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought» 1, 1982, pp. 157-78.

[34] The view of a female divine entity somehow independent, active and equal in power, has been underlined by M. Idel – in a sustained polemic against the reconstructions by E.R. Wolfson, stressing on the contrary the androcentric and phallocentric vision of the kabbalists and the subordinate, passive and occult role of the feminine within it. For two examples of this controversy between the two eminent scholars, beginning in the 1990s, see E.R. WOLFSON, *Woman – The Feminine as Other in Theosophic Kabbalah*, in L.J. SILBERSTEIN - R.L. COHN (eds.), *The Other in Jewish Thought and History*, New York UP, New York 1994, and M. IDEL, *'Limbs of the*

immanence in the world» coincides with the «heavenly entity that represents the historical community of Israel»[35] – namely, «*Knesset Yisra'el* above», the supernal agency of «Israel below», its mother, its protector, the force that presides over it throughout history, etc. In this discursive setting, a major task of human existence, and of Israel's life in particular, is to (re-)activate the right and intimate relationship between the supreme male God and his female counterpart, the Spouse of God.[36]

On the other hand, bringing forth the ancient national myth of a special covenant between God and Israel, the kabbalists tend to envision the *Shekhinah* as ultimately converging or even coinciding with the same earthly *Knesset Yisra'el*. The holy nation finally appears as the very embodiment of the divine, or even as a part of the divinity itself – either because the supernal female force takes its mundane abode, its symbolic space, its material body or garment, in the «Synagogue», namely in the ethnic-religious whole called «Israel»; or, because the latter cleaves or extends to the divine realm, and transforms herself into the supernal feminine.[37] This pattern of the kabbalistic discourse ends up boldly identifying the community of Israel itself with the spouse of God.[38] In this perspective, the major goal of Jewish existence is to create the conditions for a unification of the same earthly social group with the male deity. It is then incumbent on the Israelites to make themselves pure and righteous so as to become

Shekhinah": On the Ascent of the Divine Feminine in Kabbalah and Her Decline in Modern Scholarship, in AAVV, *Die weibliche Seite Gottes*, Kerber, Berlin 2020. Among the now rich literature on this subject, see also D. ABRAMS, *The Female Body of God in Kabbalistic Literature*, Magnes Press, Jerusalem 2005.

[35] G. SCHOLEM, *On the Mystical Shape*, cit., p. 171. Compare Id., *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*, Schocken, New York, 1969, p. 106; *Kabbalah*, Keter, Jerusalem 1974, p. 22.

[36] This view fits in with the imagery of the Israelites as the «sons» or «servants» that, through their virtuous action, promote the sacred coupling of the Father and the Mother, the King and the Queen, etc. On the supernal Triad Father-Mother-Sons, and the crucial role of Israel in the relationship between the King and the *Matronita*, see IDEL, *Kabbalah and Eros*, cit., pp. 138ff.; Id., *Ben: Sonship and Jewish Mysticism*, Continuum, London - New York 2007, chap. 4.

[37] On Israel as the «embodiment» of the divine (an incarnational perspective), see WOLFSON, *Venturing Beyond*, cit., pp. 110, 185. On the «extension of the chosen people on high» (an apotheotic perspective), see IDEL, *Kabbalah and Eros*, cit., pp. 140-1.

[38] In *Tomer Devorah* 1, 4, Cordovero describes the relationship of God to Israel as a «carnal» relationship, «since they [the people of Israel] are the mate (*bat zug*) of the Holy One, blessed be He». Commenting on this passage, C. Mopsik has observed that the kabbalist here reveals the literal but implicit sense of midrashic traditions, attesting that the carnal community of Israel is the female aspect of the deity (see MOÏSE CORDOVÉRO, *Le palmier de Débora*, Verdier, Paris 1985, p. 126, n. 30).

the perfect Bride, to embody the divine feminine, and then to couple with the divine masculine.

The two discursive formations analyzed above are surely different. The former expresses a horizontal ditheism and produces mythical narratives of the liaison between two engendered divine actors. The latter concerns the vertical but dynamic relationship between God and an elected human group, generating mythical narratives of an ethnocentric kind, where the process is either descending (from the divine dimension to its earthly dwelling place) or ascending (from the earthly group to the supernal realm). What happens, however, is that the two models – both imbued with myth and theosophy – continuously overlap and interlink, constructing together an intricate "theo-social" imaginary.[39]

It is worth noting that a close connection between *Shekhinah* and Israel already loomed in *Sefer ha-Bahir* (employing the syntagm «*Shekhinah* of Israel»[40]), and was then developed in the Zoharic context (using in several occasions the syntagm «limbs of the *Shekhinah*» and the expression «Israel forms the limbs of the *Shekhinah*»[41]). In the 16th-century chain linking Yosef Taitatzaq, Shlomo Alqabetz, Moshe Cordovero (and shaping the Sephardi Kabbalah in the early modern Ottoman Empire), that connection played a pivotal role. It will be sufficient here to quote Cordovero's words: «we [Israel] are the *Shekhinah* really (*mamash*), for the *Shekhinah* and the soul of Israel are one only thing».[42] It appears ultimately that either the community of Israel (in its cultic and righteous deeds) can constitute the

[39] A blending of the two perspectives seems to characterize for instance a Zoharic passage, where a narrative account represents the figure of the mythical hypostasis as involved in a descending process: «When Assembly of Israel descended to make Her abode on earth…» (*Zohar* 3, 4a). According to another bold textual plot found in the *Zohar*, God commands Israel to take his Spouse in order that She shall dwell among them – their intercourse being consented by the same divine Husband, as a «service of love» directed to God Himself (see *Zohar* 2, 134b-135a). Similarly, the famous song for Shabbat composed by Alqabetz in the 16th-century Safed (*Lekha Dodi*) rereads the Canticle imagery interweaving the two figurative and narrative patterns: Israel has to go meet the supernal Spouse (*Shekhinah* as Shabbat, the divine immanence in time), while on the other hand Israel herself (as the *Shekhinah*) is the maiden destined to couple with God.

[40] *Sefer ha-Bahir*, § 51. It seems to privilege as a whole the imagery of a double *Shekhinah*: see above, n. 30.

[41] See e.g. *Zohar* 2, 118a; 3, 17a (from the later stratum *Rehaya mehemna*). For a detailed analysis, see Idel, *"Limbs of the Shekhinah"*, cit., pp. 88ff. A further common motif relates the «limbs» or the «garment» of the *Shekhinah* to the 248 positive precepts commanded to the people of Israel.

[42] See the quotation and discussion in B. SACK, *In the Gates*, cit., p. 208.

body revesting the *Shekhinah*, or the souls of Israel as a whole can coincide with the *Shekhinah* herself.

3. *Self-divinization and cultic practice*

In the last decades, a "practical turn" has interested also the research on Kabbalah. Many studies have underlined the inextricable nexus between the theosophical speculation of the kabbalists and more experiential dimensions, putting in the foreground the deep concern of those mystics for normative, pragmatic, performative aspects in the Jewish cultural and cultic framework (halakhic precepts, ritual acts, local customs, etc.).[43] In this perspective, the above-described discursive forms can appear as narrative constructs for justifying and strengthening an array of social rules of behavior, by illuminating the secret rationales of those dispositions in Israel's concrete life. And in such a practical framework, the borders between iconic imaginary and image worship might become even more porous.

In accordance with the first narrative pattern, the kabbalists interpreted many aspects of the Jewish ritualistic system as stimulating the supernal «union» (*yiḥud*) between the male deity (the Holy One) and the female one (the *Shekhinah*), which – in the most common kabbalistic symbolism – coincided respectively with the sixth *sefirah* (*Tiferet*) and the tenth *sefirah* (*Malkhut*).[44] This task of «unification», which constitutes a very «need of the Highest», falls in a particular way to the people of Israel and can be achieved (only) by them.[45] Thus, drawing upon Zoharic sources, kabbalistic circles in 16th-century Safed began to recite a fixed ritual formula before the fulfilment of a precept: «I do this for the sake of the union of the Holy One, blessed be He, and His *Shekhinah*».[46]

Applying the second discursive construct to the Jewish form of life, the kabbalists considered many verbal and nonverbal acts as means for

[43] See e.g. MOTTOLESE, *Bodily Rituals*, cit., and the bibliography discussed there.

[44] A parallel linguistic imagery concerns the unification of the letters of the divine Name (the Tetragrammaton), which is gained through Israel's cultic deeds. Conversely, Israel's evil conduct is supposed to provoke a fracture in the divine name, and a rift within the divine family.

[45] See e.g. MEIR IBN GABBAY, *Avodat ha-qodesh* III, 7 (p. 257).

[46] See M. HALLAMISH, *Kabbalah in Liturgy, Halakhah and Custom*, Bar Ilan Press, Ramat-Gan 2000, pp. 45-70. Without neglecting the obvious distance, one cannot fail to note a similarity with the very ancient blessing of Semitic area concerning «*YHWH* and His *Asherah*».

perfecting the terrestrial community and transforming it into a holy celestial organism, the mate or spouse of God. Hence, the fulfillment of halakhic precepts would be a vestment of the feminine Israel, dressing «clothes» and «jewels» capable of adorning, beautifying and elevating her.[47] It is then not surprising that Safedian texts describe the whole ethical-ritual path of Israel as a route that enables the latter, fused together, to join with the upper male potency in a complete *hieros gamos* – namely, a «relationship of the flesh».[48]

In order to further this investigation into the practical spheres, we have to take into account a critical polarity in the kabbalistic discourse (again, bringing forth earlier Jewish traditions): Israel is represented either as a unitary whole or as an articulated network. Sometimes, the inner distinction of the people stands out, and a special role is attributed to the extraordinary heroes of the Scriptures or later exceptional individuals, able to gain a full intimacy with the deity. It is the case of the ancient Patriarchs, who – in accordance with a well-known rabbinic statement – constitute «the supernal Chariot».[49] The kabbalists do not only speculate on this formula, seeing the *Shekhinah* as journeying with the Fathers;[50] they also establish a daily ritual practice focused on the Fathers (corresponding to the central *sefirot Ḥesed – Gevurah – Tiferet*), while entering the synagogue.[51] Similarly, special isomorphism and interaction with the divine reality is ascribed to the post-biblical elites of Jewish males called «righteous», «pious» or «men of action» – rabbinic sages or kabbalistic worshippers performing the traditional cult with perfect knowledge and intentionality.

[47] On the hypostasizing view of the precepts as «jewels» or «ornaments» that cover the limbs of the community of Israel, making her «desirable», see the midrashic and kabbalistic sources analysed in IDEL, *Kabbalah and Eros*, cit., pp. 29-30, 34. This view is by no means only metaphorical: it is, for example, by wearing *tzitzit* and *tefillin* that the male Israelites become a desirable «bride» for God.

[48] See above, n. 38. Elsewhere, Cordovero underlines the capacity of Israel «to cling to God» – even to the upper spheres of the sefirotic realm (see his *Or ne'erav*, chap. 3, 5).

[49] *Genesis rabbah* 82, 6. Special importance in (pre-kabbalistic and kabbalistic) Jewish mystics is given to the heavenly face of Jacob. A further case in point obviously is the figure of Moses, also endowed with a luminous face: he is defined «man of *Elohim*», while the *Shekhinah* is labeled the «spouse of Moses».

[50] See e.g. *Zohar* 2, 46b, 51b; 3, 25a.

[51] See e.g. CORDOVERO, *Tomer Devorah*, chap. 10, and *Tefillah le-Mosheh*, f. 1b, working on Zoharic instances. Let me also recall the ceremonies of Sukkot regarding the «celestial guests» (*ushpizin*) to be honoured in the booth (seven righteous biblical figures corresponding to seven *sefirot*) – another ritual custom that, established by the *Zohar*, had much diffusion in Judaism.

In many other instances, the people of Israel appear as a unitary collective entity, namely as a «corporate personality».[52] A common self-description in kabbalistic texts typifies Israel as «one single holy nation», «one supernal pattern», the «Assembly of Israel», engaged as a whole in a unique relationship with God.[53] The same outstanding individuals mentioned above often are metonymical figures, expressing features and experiences of the entire ethnicity (it is the case of Jacob/Israel, Moses, etc.).[54] Rather than to holy men, the kabbalistic discourse here relates to a holy community – whose original collective sacredness can be then actualized by singles or smaller groups. Accordingly, as already said, a fundamental binary opposition distinguishes «Israel» from the «nations of the world». The former is described as pure/holy/righteous, while the latter are connoted inversely, sometimes even in demonic terms.[55] Wolfson has thoroughly explored such «ontological distinction» in the Zoharic Kabbalah, showing its exclusivist orientation, marked by xenophobic overtones in certain variants.[56] Idel has even discerned an aspect of «narcissistic ethnocentrism» (or «ethno-eroticism») in the classical theosophical-theurgical Kabbalah, which might be defined in general as a «particularistic» mysticism.[57] Indeed, the social imaginary flowing from the *Zohar* and developed in the post-Expulsion age, appears decisively ethnocentric, grounded on nationalistic mythical accounts, reflecting a "collective narcissism", and strongly oriented to distinguish, reify and sacralize the Israelite group.

The question then arises whether such hypostatization of the «unique and holy nation» in a semi-divine or divine figure, could be also

[52] This expression, employed in biblical studies, has been adopted by Moshe Idel and applied to later Jewish literatures.

[53] This does not prevent the kabbalists from dealing at length with the dramatic sins crossing Israel's history, and from considering entire generations even guilty of idolatry (see the Zoharic discussions on the «mixed multitude» and its wicked behavior, examined by TISHBY, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, cit., pp. 1433ff.).

[54] The Zoharic exegesis underlines that only when the twelve tribes of Israel join together, they achieve the «arrangement of the *Shekhinah*». Then, Jacob/Israel becomes the bridegroom of the *Shekhinah*, which somehow replaces the figure of Rachel (see e.g. *Zohar* 1, 155a ff., 173b-174a). On this complex motif, and the cultural interaction and competition behind it, see E.D. HASKELL, *Mystical Resistance: Uncovering the Zohar's Conversations with Christianity*, Oxford UP, Oxford 2016, in part. pp. 19-22.

[55] See above, n. 22. On the alleged roots of the «Mosaic distinction», see the works by J. Assmann (e.g. *Moses the Egyptian*).

[56] See his *Venturing Beyond*, cit., chap. 1.

[57] See his *Kabbalah and Eros*, cit., chap. 3. Idel has contrasted this mythical and particularistic Kabbalah spreading from the Iberian peninsula to the more philosophical and universalistic Kabbalah found in Renaissance Italy.

accompanied by specific forms of worship. In other words, did the apotheotic (self-divinizing) discourse on Israel constitute the trigger for some kind of cultic practices focused on Israel? Let me here just hint at a few clues in the kabbalistic re-signification of religious activity, which would deserve a much more extensive study.

In the Zoharic tradition, the ordinary collective prayer service of Israel plays a major role, and is raised higher than the free individual prayer.[58] The primary condition for the community service is that the worshippers should love each other and integrate in a deep mutual engagement, because in this way their souls can merge, and they become limbs of the same body, making the *Knesset Yisra'el* a unitary and perfect ensemble.[59] Of remarkable importance is the kabbalistic prescription, performed at the entrance of the synagogue before prayer time, to recite the biblical verses commanding to love each other.[60] The quorum of ten officiants (*minyan*) gathering in the synagogue for the daily liturgy at a fixed time, and representing the entire Assembly of Israel, has a crucial function and achieves formidable religious, mystical and theurgical goals. During prayer the *Shekhinah* appears and settles upon each person of the tenfold congregation;[61] the latter can be seen as the divine Reign (*Malkhut*), in close relationship with the divine Glory (*Binah*);[62] the participants embrace in themselves the ten *sefirot*, being transformed in a «chariot» for the divine pleroma; they are then able to foster and effect the intercourse with the male upper Godhead.[63]

Similarly, there are festive ritual ceremonies charged with new meanings, and filled with special customs by the kabbalists, in which the Assembly of Israel (both as the earthly congregation and the projection of it on heaven) plays a key role. We have mentioned the relevance among Safedian circles of the «welcoming of the Shabbat», the liminal time when

[58] See TISHBY, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, cit., pp. 964-5.

[59] See CORDOVERO, *Tomer Devorah*, chap. 1, 4. On this and similar sources, see HALLAMISH, *The Relation*, cit., p. 292.

[60] On the later diffusion of this kabbalistic custom in prayer manuals, see HALLAMISH, *Kabbalah*, cit., pp. 356ff.

[61] This occurs especially during the recite of the *Shema* prayer (see *Zohar* 2, 160b). However, the one who arrives at the synagogue first «unites with the *Shekhinah* in single union» (*Zohar* 1, 131a-b).

[62] The term Glory (*Kavod*) can in fact refer to *Malkhut* or *Binah*.

[63] All this prefigures the future – eschatological – events, when the intimacy between Israel and the divine shall reach the peak. On the other hand, it appears that most kabbalists refer to current processes, rather than translating them into an apocalyptic time.

the encounter with the «face of the *Shekhinah*» occurs.[64] One may also refer to the rituals of Sukkot, as the community sits in the booth, the «shade of faith», and «the *Shekhinah* spreads her wings from above».[65] Let me finally cite the vast elaboration of special *tiqqunim*, such as the *tiqqun ḥaṣot* («the arrangement/reparation at midnight vigil»), a ritual complex intended to rectify the *Knesset Yisra'el* and to adorn the *Shekhinah* with words of Torah, for the sake of her union with the masculine.[66]

To a larger extent, the theosophical-theurgical Kabbalah relates to community cultic activities, either in the ordinary daily service or in the holy days. Yet it also refers to less nomian or anomian practices with mystical or magical effects, performed by single individuals or closed special groups – an elitist tendency that appears to increase in early modern times. Thus, for instance, we have evidence of a special custom diffused among the adepts of Safedian confraternities: at cyclical specific times, they left their homes and wives, walked in miserable conditions to the tombs of renown ancestors, and prayed there in such a way that – during these exiles (*gerushin*) – they achieved carnal conjunction with their second and supernal wife, the divine presence, finally fashioning themselves as a «chariot for the exiled *Shekhinah*».[67] Here, the mythical imaginary established the conditions for an extraordinary encounter between pious men and the *Shekhinah*, where the latter, the highest goal of the passion and action of the former, finally «cleaved» to them (note that, engendered as males, they were somehow integrated in the female celestial dimension[68]). More

[64] See above, n. 39.

[65] In this case, the spatial and symbolic distinction between Israel and the Gentiles is overtly clear and exclusivist: «whoever is not from the holy root and stock of Israel shall not dwell in them» (*Zohar* 3, 103a).

[66] Already important in the *Zohar* (see e.g. 3, 12b-13a), this nocturnal ritual acquired much relevance in the Lurianic Kabbalah. It aimed in particular at the cyclical restoration of the status and body of Rachel, symbol of the *Shekhinah*, and at the cyclical transformation of the worshippers in a «chariot for the *Shekhinah*» (see M. IDEL, *Messianic Mystics*, Yale UP, New Haven-London 1998, pp. 314, 317).

[67] See CORDOVERO, *Tomer Devorah*, chap. 9, and *Sefer Gerushin*. In several Jewish contexts, the graves of the holy men to be visited in pilgrimage, were evidently subjected to some kind of veneration and worship. On the transformation of the individual self into a vessel for the divine presence, see E.P. FISHBANE, *A Chariot for the Shekhinah: Identity and the Ideal Life in Sixteenth-Century Kabbalah*, «Journal of Religious Ethics» 37, 2009, pp. 385-418; P. KOCH, *Human Self-Perfection: A Re-Assessment of Kabbalistic Musar-Literature of Sixteenth-Century Safed*, Cherub Press, Los Angeles 2015, in part. pp. 97ff.

[68] The kabbalists were in fact sensitive to the gender issue, and reflected in manifold and intricate ways on the relationship between the male Israelites, the supernal

generally, within these contexts, experiences such as the reception of a revelation from the divine feminine,[69] or even the coupling or merging with her, were reserved to single individuals or to restricted circles of enlightened Jews. Nevertheless, in my opinion, also elitist or exceptional paths as well as the life journeys of single souls – including processes of transmigration (*gilgul*) or impregnation (*ḥibbur*) – were mainly oriented to promote a collective experience that ought to engage the entire Jewish community.[70]

To sum up, it appears that both the social imagination and the social activity of the kabbalists gravitate at large around a hypostasis of female gender – *Shekhinah/Malkhut* –, with all the risks connected to this standing. Thus, the kabbalistic review of ritual practices through mythical imaginaries, appears usually oriented to structure a shared experience where the same congregation is involved as a corporate feminine entity that coalesces with the supernal feminine. In this sense, the «cult of the *Shekhinah*»[71] is somehow mirrored by a self-divinization of the community of Israel. It is certainly true that at any layer (speculative, narrative, or practical), the kabbalists continually stress the monotheistic principle of «unity», and attribute to their cultic work the primary aim of «unifying» the feminine with the masculine. Yet, precisely this emphasis on the «need» for «unification» shows the force of plurality, or polarity, and the implicit pitfall of focusing – too much or exclusively – on the female hypostasis. The kabbalists were deeply sensitive to these risks (although it remains dubious to what extent they subjectively perceived a peril in their approach to the people of Israel). They recovered from rabbinic tradition the fear of «cutting the shoots» (*qiṣuṣ ha-neṭiy'ot*) – namely, the fear of a concentration on an autonomous entity somehow «separated» from the entire divine realm and worshipped for itself.[72] This sin – in fact, a kind of image/idol worship – was related primarily to the «impulse to reify *Shekhinah*, the feminine aspect

but immanent female dimension, and the higher male dimensions. See e.g. AVRAHAM AZULAY, *Ḥesed le-Avraham*, *Ma'ayan* 1, 22.

[69] The mystical phenomenon of Maggidism, also spreading in 16th-century Kabbalah, expresses a (at least partial) deification of individual sages, somehow pervaded by the divine presence and manifestation.

[70] I hope to demonstrate this point in a forthcoming broader inquiry.

[71] Idel has spoken of a very «cult of the *Shekhinah*», which intensified within the post-Expulsion Kabbalah: see his *Jewish Mysticism Among the Jews of Arab/Moslem Lands*, «The Journal for the Study of Sephardic & Mizrahi Jewry» 1, 2007, pp. 33-4.

[72] See TISHBY, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, cit., pp. 374-6, especially dwelling on the sin of Adam as the archetypal separation.

of the divine», and to venerate her in isolation from the rest of the supernal forces.[73]

Let me just mention here a further idolatrous drive that is distinct from, but also related to the previous one. In innumerable discussions – which interlace exegetical, mythical and magical stances –, the kabbalists talk of demonic entities that exist, have intervened in Israel's history, and go on exerting their wicked power on the world.[74] Remarkably, the same last *sefirah* (*Malkhut*/*Shekhinah*) is often described as a left, sinister, punitive dimension: being the liminal and more fragile emanation of the Godhead, it can be easily overrun by impure or external forces, and acquire negative traits.[75] On this basis Wolfson has acutely discerned two parallel types of idol worship: a) «the worship of the feminine aspect of holiness alienated from the masculine»; b) «the worship of the feminine aspect of the demonic».[76] In many cases the kabbalistic tradition seems indeed to border on the latter, especially insofar as, permeated by earlier magical stances, it suggests active operations to cope with the evil entities. On one hand, the kabbalists remarked the link between image worship and the demonic realm; on the other hand, they were eager to explain how, through ritual acts, the community of Israel itself might directly turn to evil forces and «appease» them.[77] In principle the distinction was sharp and clear: magical (foreign) practices provoke confusion and disorder, while the Jewish practices restore harmony and order. In effect, the boundaries between mysticism-theurgy and idolatry-magic could become very permeable.[78]

[73] See WOLFSON, *Iconicity*, cit., pp. 24ff.

[74] These discussions deal for instance with evil angelic forces (Samael, Lilit, etc.), the serpent, the Golden Calf, the impure beasts of the Merkavah, etc.

[75] A statement from Nahmanides' school expresses the problematic nature of the last *sefirah*: it is «part of the emanative process (*be-atzilut*), but not of the divine unity (*be-aḥdut*)». The *Zohar* largely dwells on the attempt of the Other Side to rule over the *Shekhinah*: see TISHBY, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, cit., pp. 377-9.

[76] WOLFSON, *Iconicity*, cit., p. 26.

[77] Thus, for example, they interpret the «secret» of the particular custom to carry a manifest hair that protrudes from the *tefillin* box, pointing out that this is the hair of an impure animal, by means of which the practitioner can satisfy and placate the heavenly Accuser. On Zoharic accounts of the ways for «appeasing the Other Side», see TISHBY, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, cit., p. 453.

[78] Let me just recall that the Radbaz – a towering halakhic and kabbalistic authority in 16th-century Egypt – presents a complex and ambivalent attitude to magic. While rejecting some popular practices against the demons (amulets, *segulot*) as idolatrous, he acknowledges the effectiveness of some of them. On the other hand, he justifies magical uses of Spanish origin, which will be starkly condemned by later authorities as «alien worship» (*'avodah zarah*).

4. *Hypostatization (and de-hypostatization) of elements of Jewishness*

It must be recalled that, beside instances of reification and deification concerning human beings or social bodies, the kabbalistic lore exhibits similar processes concerning Jewish linguistic signs or textual bodies – such as the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, particularly of divine names (understood as entities of the highest rank, at the heart of visual and contemplative practices), or the entire corpus of the holy Scripture.[79] For example, on the basis of earlier perceptions of the latter as a celestial entity with supreme characteristics, the canonic code becomes the perfect locus or mediator of the divine presence, or an embodied form of the divine (also marked by anthropomorphic features).[80] Here again, the kabbalistic discourse is not only speculative, but has important effects on experiential and performative layers. The «reification of the Torah» tends to transform that textual hypostasis, often perceived as the female aspect of God, into the object of a cultic work accompanied by reverence and adoration, passion and lust, again bordering on idol worship. As Wolfson has argued, «the tendency on the part of Jewish men to treat the scroll of Torah as a fetishist object of erotic imagination» was likely another mode of «cutting the shoots», isolating the feminine potency.[81]

On this backdrop, the birth and spread of the statement «God, Torah and Israel are one only thing», shall result a bit less striking.[82] On the one

[79] Among the numerous inquiries by M. IDEL, see *Enchanted Chains. Techniques and Rituals in Jewish Mysticism*, Cherub, Los Angeles 2005. Here Idel deals also at length with the hypostatization and divinization of Jewish precepts. On this issue, see above, n. 47, and also C. MOPSIK, *Les grands textes de la cabale*, Verdier, Paris 1993, pp. 111-4.

[80] Beside Scholem's groundbreaking essays (e.g. *The Meaning of the Torah in Jewish Mysticism*), see various studies by Idel (e.g. *Absorbing Perfections*) and Wolfson (e.g. *Female Imaging of the Torah*; see also above, n. 9). According to some scholars (such as J. Assmann), the same interdiction of idolatry in Ancient Israel led to make the Torah a holy text – a process that however might lead to idolize the sacred language and writing.

[81] See WOLFSON, *Iconicity*, cit., p. 26, also speaking of an «idolatrous reification of the feminine as autonomous power». On kabbalistic views of the Bible as a cultic object, see also IDEL, *Representing God*, cit., pp. 38, 42ff.

[82] Interestingly, scholars have progressively backdated the origins of this formula. While Scholem and Heschel considered it a creation of the Hasidic world, Tishby argued that Hasidim and Mitnaggedim alike drew the notion from Moshe Luzzatto's commentary on the *Zohar*. B. Sack has however traced the triangle among Jewish intellectuals living in the 16th-century Ottoman Empire. In Recanati's work (beginning of the 14th century), one already finds the bold statement that «the sages of Kabbalah say that the Holy One, blessed be He, is the Torah».

hand, the sentence reveals the apotheotic investment that concerned the holy writings (Torah) as much as the holy people (Israel), somehow transforming both of them into distinct divine entities: endowed with female connotations in a similar way, they were envisioned as complementary forces interacting with the male Godhead in the supernal pleroma.[83] On the other hand, the same sentence intends to reconfirm the fundamental monotheistic discourse of Judaism, substantially arguing that no clear boundary can be drawn between the Deity, its revelatory Text and its treasured Nation – so that, paradoxically, the triad is in fact nothing but the expression of a single unity.[84]

Let us return in conclusion to our main assumption. As discussed at the beginning, Wolfson's research has brought the attention to the «impulse for idolatry» to be found in kabbalistic sources, identifying it chiefly in an inner drive to visualize the imageless God in images, namely in linguistic shapes. In the present paper, I have tried to examine some further declinations of that idolatrous impulse, highlighting in particular discursive constructs in which divine qualities are incorporated into human beings – first and foremost, the people of Israel as a collective body.[85] To put it in Durkheim's terms, the Jewish culture would contain an inexhaustible mythical engine (determining both belief and practice) that continues to produce a deifying «transfiguration» of the same social group, rendering «sacred» all the major institutions and items of Jewish society.

One may react to such a picture, asking polemically: could Jewish sages really be blamed for having hypostasized and divinized figures beside or beyond the One Only God, even falling into some sort of idol worship? The point is that the answer shall likely change according to the theological beliefs or the philosophical underpinnings that are presupposed, ultimately according to the kind of monotheism assumed as "pure" or "correct" –

[83] In some instances, the «land of Israel» (*Eretz Yisra'el*) was added to the triad (see SACK, *In the Gates*, cit., p. 108). Indeed, spatial terms such as «the land of Israel» (or «Jerusalem») were submitted to hypostasizing processes, and usually seen as corresponding to the female last *sefirah*. In the last century there has been a deification of the same «state of Israel» by exponents of the religious-messianic nationalism (Rav Tzvi Yehuda Kook) – a move that has been recently described as «idolatrous» by Jewish political-theological critique (Menachem Lorberbaum).

[84] A comparative view confronting these instances with Christian thought, has been suggested and explored in research (e.g. by Liebes and Idel), starting from the various expressions of tri-unity scattered in the *Zohar*.

[85] As said (see above, n. 11), Wolfson has clearly discerned the kabbalistic inclination «to deify Israel as the embodiment of the divine» (*Venturing Beyond*, cit., p. 185), yet he has failed to analyze the idolatrous potential of such a tendency.

for this substantially determines what "use of images" can or cannot be tolerated.[86] This has not been my viewpoint. Nor have I been interested here in the historical developments or controversies that brought kabbalistic views to be effectively accused of multiplying the deity, materializing the supernal realm, or worshiping other gods.

In this inquiry, more phenomenologically-oriented, we have rather observed some long-term patterns in the discourse and practice of a major kabbalistic culture, patterns that relate – in my opinion – to a strong ambivalence in the attitude to images. In the mythical language of the kabbalists, concrete figures (such as the «chosen nation») could play at the same time as signs that refer to transcendent realities, and as matters that embody supernal properties. Thus, while those sages shared the notion of unity and transcendence of God (in line with the metaphysical grids of Jewish philosophers), they inclined to project on high and hypostasize multiple sacred elements. Not only they developed the imagery of a personal God with plural and dynamic faces; they also imagined the divine as an articulated organic system, made of rather differentiated dimensions (distinct personae, complex architectonics, geometrical or linguistic structures, etc.). Within this theosophical *imaginaire*, forms of mediation drawn by earlier Jewish traditions were to become (quasi) autonomous divine entities – especially when connoted by female traits.[87] It was then logical to turn to multiple supernal forces, in imagination as well as in praxis, even in order to regain unity.

All this, as noted before, was accompanied by the perception that in this context there was a high risk of articulating/disarticulating the divine unity, separating heavenly entities or theophoric images, and finally

[86] Wolfson's assertion that the kabbalists did not «cross the line set by the traditional ban on iconic representation of the divine» (*Iconicity*, cit., p. 18), seems to be tuned only with some segments of the same Jewish tradition, and to express a somehow apologetic stance. More correct appears his own statement that «the anthropomorphic configuration of the divine within the imagination» was «an acceptable form of idolatry» for most kabbalists (ibi, p. 19, n. 50). In my perspective, however, their level of tolerance in this domain was even higher.

[87] It is worth reminding that the Jewish philosophers – in their much more drastic endeavour to remove, or rationalistically deconstruct, the multiple images of God – decided to put the *Shekhinah* out of the divinity, making it the First Created Thing (see SCHOLEM, *On the Mystical Shape*, cit., pp. 154-6). Indeed, also some theosophical circles attempted to lessen the ontological status of *Shekhinah/Malkhut* (see above, n. 75), and this is especially true for the kabbalistic trends more influenced by philosophy.

worshiping them as distinct potencies.[88] By no chance, the kabbalistic texts deploy manifold strategies to control the impulse for idolatry and to repress its most troubling outcomes. The theoretical emphasis on unity and otherness of God is obviously to balance the more imaginative and eventually idolatrous vectors. In my opinion, however, the most important strategy likely lies in the above-mentioned flexibility and pluralism of kabbalistic language. A caleidoscope of multiple interpretations and fluid imageries enables to "de-hypostasize" every image that may appear too crystallized – allowing to say that it is only an image (return to metaphor), that another image has to be taken into exam (pluralism), that it has to be read in the light of a theological scheme lowering it in hierarchy, etc. Notwithstanding, some "hypostasizing" leanings could hardly be mitigated. In this sense, Scholem spoke of a «rebellion of images» in that «revival of myth» that characterizes the theosophical Kabbalah, with all its «materialism» in discourse and practice.[89] Flowing from the ancient treasure of mythologoumena available in Judaism and surfacing at specific stages, those images or symbols could easily shift into reified supernal entities, marking (what for someone is) the decisive step "from icons to idols".[90]

Thus, whatever the history of *Shekhinah* and *Knesset Yisra'el*, it is undeniable that much kabbalistic literature presents a personification and apotheosis of the feminine, and a self-divinizing projection of the holy nation into the celestial sphere. The mythopoetic and particularistic discourse of the theosophical kabbalists inclined to hypostasize the two

[88] This risk was acknowledged, expressed and counteracted by inner-cultural (and not only extra-cultural) segments: see above, around n. 72. Halbertal and Margalit have come to the conclusion that, from the kabbalistic viewpoint, idolatry is not so much an «error» (an abomination in metaphysics or belief) but rather «an act of destruction» of the divine order (a fault in cultic practice). The one who commits idolatry – «cutting the plants» – is the one that «instead of worshiping the divinity as a whole […] addresses only one of the *sefirot* and thus isolates it from the rest of the system of divine forces». In this way, he does not respect neither the organic unity of the deity nor its inner hierarchy (see *Idolatry*, cit., pp. 190-7).

[89] On the first syntagm, see SCHOLEM, *On the Mystical Shape*, cit., p. 147. See also M. MOTTOLESE, *Dio nel giudaismo rabbinico. Immagini e mito*, Morcelliana, Brescia 2010, and the bibliography contained there.

[90] According to Halbertal and Margalit, «kabbalistic myth» includes the reification of symbolic aspects of the divinity as quasi-independent forces, the production of narrative and dramatic relations between them, the construction of sacramental acts involving them (see *Idolatry*, cit., pp. 96ff., 197ff.). In this way, they argue, «idolatry infiltrates into the very heart of Judaism, and the struggle against idolatry becomes an intrareligious struggle between various factions that consider themselves traditional» (ibi, p. 201).

images, often arriving at an overlapping between them. In this way, the female personality of the people of Israel could become a formidable icon of the divine, or – from other viewpoints – an image on the verge of idolatry.

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