

THE ASCENT OF THE SOUL IN EARLY HASIDISM (18th century)

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I.

Ascent to heaven is a major practice related to the spiritual biography of the religious *perfecti*: Siberian Shamans, apocalyptic figures, Greek medicine men, Jewish *Zaddiqim* have performed those heavenly tours that have fascinated Ioan Couliano so much¹. The attribution of such an adventure is, in many cases, connected to a constitutive experience; that of a religion or of a new phase in an already established one. Indeed, this is the case also insofar as many Jewish leading figures are involved. However, a survey of the history of the ascent to heaven in Judaism reveals a rather interesting situation: the earliest descriptions of the founding figures, the patriarchs or Moses were never described as ascending for a *rendez-vous* with the divine; God has been revealing Himself by coming down to the recipients of the divine message, but not by bringing the messenger to His realm in order to take the message. In other words, the Biblical apprehension of the revelation is based upon the assumption that man cannot transcend his mundane situation and penetrate into the divine realm, while God is able to adapt Himself, and his message, to the human capacity. While the way down was open, the way up was totally closed². In more concrete terms, Moses is portrayed in the Biblical texts as ascending to a mountain in order to receive the Torah, while God, on His part, is descending upon the mountain. The human remains human, and he is not radically transformed by his reception of the divine message. Moses remained a man, who is going to die despite the fact that he received the Torah. In other words, it is the divine theophany that is the constituting moment of Biblical Judaism not an apotheotic experience of the mystic³.

The apocalyptic literature represents a drastic move from this point of view. It is the human who takes the initiative for an encounter with the divine, and this encounter takes place in the divine realm. The divine zone itself, not an elevated mountain, is the scene of the mystical encounter and revelation. Apocryphic in its literary genre, this literature propelled a large series of figures into celestial zones, «*out of this world*» to use Ioan's phrase, in order to allow them to come back with the credentials of an interview with the divine monarch. Moses, Abraham, Isaiah or Enoch have been attributed both journeys and books about those celestial journeys⁴. In some cases, the idea of a deep transformation of

¹ See Ioan P. COULIANO, *Out of this World. Otherworldly Journeys from Gilgamesh to Albert Einstein*, [Shambhala, Boston and London, 1991]; *Psychanodia I: A Survey of the Evidence Concerning the Ascension of the Soul and its Relevance* [Leiden, Brill, 1983]

² The ascent of Elijah, perhaps also that of Enoch, were not presented in the Bible as initiated by men, but rather by God.

³ On a short survey of the importance of these two concepts see Moshe IDEL, "Metatron: Some Remarks on Myth in Jewish Mysticism", ed. H. PEDAYA, *Myth in Judaism*, Beer Sheva, 1996, pp. 29-44 (Hebrew).

⁴ See Martha HIMMELFARB, "Heavenly Ascent and the Relationship of the Apocalypses and the *Hekhalot* Literature", *Hebrew Union College Annual* vol. LIV [1988] pp. 73-100.

human personality, including some corporeal changes, that are related to their stay in the supernal worlds has been expressed⁵.

This motif of a mythical ascent of man was preserved, and even elaborated in some Hebrew treatises written after the destruction of the second temple. In the Hebrew mystical treatises, known under the generic title of the *Heikhalot* literature, the ascent on the high is a major subject-matter. In those writings, it is the initiative of the mystic that is the starting point of the mystical journey. As to the goals of these ascents, there are divergences between scholars as to what is the main target: there is a more mystical reading of this goal, which means that the mystic is experiencing an encounter with God, viewed as a supernal anthropomorphic entity of immense sizes⁶. According to other scholarly views it is the participation in the heavenly liturgy that is the goal of the ascent⁷. However, more recently, an emphasis upon the importance of the magical attainment of the ascender to the higher world is evident in some studies⁸.

In all the cases, the protagonists of these heavenly ascents are mainly post-Biblical figures, some of the founders of the first phase of Rabbinic literature, known as Tannaite. Rabbi Akiva ben Joseph, Rabbi Ishmael, Yohanan ben Zakkai, Rabbi Eleazar ben Arakh, Rabbi Nehuniah ben ha-Kanah, Shimeon ben Zoma, Shimeon ben Azzai, Elisha ben Abbuiah. Biblical figures indeed appear from time to time in the *Heikhalot* literature, but they do not constitute the main protagonists. Enoch and Moses are still mentioned, but it is only rarely that their name surface in those writings in an important context⁹.

These writings have been composed between the fourth and the eighth centuries. In the Rabbinic literature that has been committed to writing in this period, the ascent to heaven plays a much less conspicuous role. This difference can be explained at least in two different, and perhaps complementary ways: from the literary point of view, the Rabbinic literature is more concerned with legalistic and interpretive matters rather than with mysticism, myth and magic. These topics however recur in many places both in the Talmud and Midrash, but they do not constitute the focus of these literary genres. On the other hand, there were tendencies in this literature to suppress more centrifugal propensities, in order to cultivate a more this-worldly religiosity. However, all this said, I wonder whether the comparison of those discussions in the Rabbinic literature which deal with the question of the ascent on the high to that of their presentation in the *Heikhalot* literature, will disclose a vision of this issue that is drastically different from that of the *Heikhalot* literature.

In the Talmud, Moses and four Tannaitic figures are described as ascending on the high. Moreover, at least in one important detail, it seems that in a version of the ascent on the high as found in Talmud, it is in this type of literary corpus that a more magical turn has been preserved. The religious attainment of Rabbi Akiva allowed him not only to ascend to the divine world, but when angels attempted to throw him down, God intervened and declared that this rabbi is worthwhile of making a magical use of the divine Glory, in Hebrew, *lehishtamesh bi-khvodi*¹⁰. However, in the version found in the *Heikhalot* literature, the same rabbi is described as worthwhile of looking or contemplating, the divine

⁵ See Moshe IDEL, "Enoch is Metatron", *Immanuel*, vol. 24/25 (1990), pp. 220-240.

⁶ On the gigantic divinity, designated as *Shi'ur Qomah* see Martin S. COHEN, *The Shiur Qomah: Liturgy and Theurgy in Pre-Kabbalistic Jewish Mysticism* [Lanham, 1983]

⁷ See Peter SCHAEFER, *Hekhalot-Studien* [Mohr, Tuebingen, 1988] p. 286.

⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 277-295.

⁹ See the lengthy discussions on Moses's role in *Heikhalot* texts in David HALPERIN, *The Faces of the Chariot* [Mohr, Tuebingen, 1987] pp. 289-322, 335-336, 420-426.

¹⁰ See *Hagigah*, fol. 15b.

glory: *lehistakkel bi-khvodi*¹¹. What may be the implication of such a difference for the goal of the ascent on the high: in my opinion, the Rabbinic version of the ascent is concerned with exercising a certain influence, which can be described as magical or theurgical, on the divine Glory. On the other hand, the gazing, or contemplation of this Glory, seems to be the main goal of the *Heikhalot* literature. In this type of mystical literature, the knowledge of the sizes of the divine body is a crucial part of the soteriological knowledge. I assume that the emphasis upon precise sizes has a certain repercussion on the broader religious attitude in this type of literature. This is why not a change in the glory, or its being put in the service of man is hinted at in the *Heikhalot* literature but the contemplation of its static state¹². While Rabbinic literature was inclined toward a view that God cannot be seen while alive, the *Heikhalot* literature subscribed to a much more positive attitude toward the contemplation of the divine¹³.

A third ideal of the ascent, which will concern us much more in the following discussions is too expressed in the *Heikhalot* literature: Rabbi Akivah is described as receiving the revelation of a name, while contemplating the vision of the divine chariot¹⁴. This name enabled him and his students to accomplish magical operations, as the use of the verb *mishtamesh* in this context hints at. Bringing down an occult knowledge that confers extraordinary power is evident in this instance. The same is also the case in an introduction to a magical treatise named *Shimmushei Torah* where Moses is described as ascending on the high and, after a contest with various angels, he has been revealed not only the Torah, but also the way to read it as a magical document by transforming the common sequel of the canonical text into names which have various magical uses¹⁵. In other words, magic related to the divine names that are found, in a cryptic manner in the text of the canon, has been revealed to Moses alongside the revelation of the Torah. Moreover, according to this introduction, Moses has been given, as a gift, also *segullot*, namely remedies¹⁶.

Ascending to the high and bringing down some form of esoteric knowledge, either in the form of magical names, remedies or a magical reading of the Torah can be understood as a model, which I propose to call mystical-magical: the first move, the ascent on the high represents the mystical phase of the model, as it allows to the religious *perfectus* to be in contact with the divine or with celestial entities. His bringing down a secret lore, which has in many cases magical qualities, represents the magical aspect of this model. In the ancient literature, the mystical move took place either *in corpore*, or as I propose to understand some of the *Heikhalot* discussions, in an astral body¹⁷. However, in the medieval types of literature, the more dominant way of attaining a contact with the divine, or semi-divine

¹¹ *Heikhalot Zutarti*, ed. R. ELIOR, [Jerusalem, 1982] p. 23.

¹² See Moshe IDEL, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* [New Haven, London, 1989] pp. 157-158.

¹³ See the state of the art in Nathaniel DEUTSCH, *The Gnostic Imagination. Gnosticism, Mandaeism, and Merkabah Mysticism*, Brill, Leiden, 1955, pp. 135-150.

¹⁴ *Heikhalot Zutarti*, p. 22; Peter SCHAEFER, ed. *Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur*, [Tuebingen, 1981] pp. 143-144.

¹⁵ Moshe IDEL, "The Concept of the Torah in the Heikhalot Literature and Its Metamorphoses in Kabbalah", in *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought*, vol. I [1991] pp. 27-29. [Hebrew]

¹⁶ See *Otzar Midrashim*, ed. J.D. EISENSTEIN, [New York, 1915], p. 307. Cf. IDEL, "The Concept of the Torah" pp. 27-29; HALPERIN, *Faces of the Chariot*, pp. 289-319.

¹⁷ See Moshe IDEL, *Golem, Jewish Magical and Mystical Traditions on the Artificial Anthropoid* [SUNY Press, Albany, 1990] pp. 285-286.

entities is by means of a *Himmelsreise der Seele*. Due to the impact of the Greek and Hellenistic types of psychologies, Jewish authors have adopted more spiritual explanations of the communion of the soul. In lieu of the ascent of the person, the union or the communion of the soul, or intellect, with God was conceived as the mystical component of the mystical-magical model¹⁸. This is but a more “spiritualized” version of the more archaic model. Hasidism has been acquainted with the various versions of the mystical-magical model.

II

The 18th century Hasidism, a major form of Jewish mysticism, and one of its most recent phases, preserved a peculiarly interesting version of the ascent on the high. Its founding master, Rabbi Yisrael ben Eliezer, better known as the Besht, the acronym of the Hebrew words Ba'al Shem Tov, namely the «*possessor of the Good Name*» has performed, according to some texts, ascents on the high¹⁹. This practice is by no means unknown in the period between the *Heikhalot* literature and the middle of the 18th century. In the span of a *millennium* and more, that separate these two types of Jewish literature, many Jewish mystics are described as ascending on the high, and I shall not attempt to survey here the extant material²⁰. Not because these medieval discussions are irrelevant for the Hasidic text we are going to analyze, but because the particular details I am interested to deal with here are found, apparently, only in the relatively earlier late antiquity material, rather than in the medieval texts. It should be noticed that not only in the instance of the ascent on the high, that will be elaborated in the following pages, the affinity between the older material and the hasidic one is obvious; this is also the case insofar as the way of study, cultivated by the Besht, is concerned²¹.

The Besht has been described by a middle 19th century Hasidic master as someone whose «*soul was ascending and body remained as still as a mineral*»²², and spoke with the Messiah and with the Faithful Shepherd²³ and the answers they gave to his questions, and he was an expert in matters in the Account of the Creation and in the Account of the Chariot, and in the entire Torah²⁴. The ascent on the high was connected, just as in the ancient Jewish literature, to the famous esoteric topics of the two accounts²⁵. Thus, the Besht has been envisaged by his much later follower, as expert in matters of ancient Jewish mysticism, which includes the performance of ascents on the high. Indeed, in material related to *Heikhalot* literature, the ascent on the high in order to converse with the Messiah is found²⁶. Someone may argue against the authenticity of a middle 19th century passage

¹⁸ See Moshe IDEL, *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic*, chh. 2-3.

¹⁹ See e.g. Yaakow KAIDANER, *Sippurim Nora'im* ed. Gedalyah NIGAL, [Jerusalem, 1992] pp. 36-37 [Hebrew].

²⁰ On this issue see Moshe IDEL, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, pp. 88-96.

²¹ See Moshe IDEL, *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic* ch. 5.

²² *Domem*. See also IDEL, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, p. 95 where a Hasidic description of Moses in a cataleptic situation, is analyzed.

²³ Namely Rabbi Shimeon bar Yohai, the alleged author of the book of the *Zohar*.

²⁴ Adduced from a manuscript of Rabbi Yizhaq Aizik Safrin of Komarno in Rabbi Shimenon Menahem Mendel of Gavardshaw's collection of material on the Besht, *Ba'al Shem Tov* [Lodge, 1938] I, p. 18.

²⁵ This is the case at least in the Babylonian Talmudic text in *Hagigah* fol. 15b.

²⁶ See the text printed in Yehudah EVEN SHMUEL, *Midreshei Ge'ulah*, [Jerusalem, 1954] p. 73.

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for a better understanding of the middle 18th century experiences. Indeed, the above text seems to combine the ascent on the high in order to speak with the Messiah, and the experience of the Besht in matters of the two accounts and his knowledge of the Torah.

Let us turn to a passage, which is part of a famous epistle attributed to the Besht, who describes his alleged ascent on the high. The epistle has been addressed to his brother-in-law, Rabbi Gershon of Kosov:

«On Rosh ha-Shanah of the year 5507 (1746), I performed an incantation²⁷ for the ascent of the soul, known to you. And in that vision I saw wondrous things, which I had never seen until then from the day that I became spiritually aware. And it is impossible to relate and to tell what I saw and learned in that ascent hither, even in private. But when I returned to the lower Paradise²⁸, I saw the souls of living and of dead persons, both of those with whom I was acquainted and those with whom I was not acquainted... numberless, in a to and fro movement, ascending from one world to the other through the column²⁹ known to adepts in esoteric matters³⁰... And I asked my teacher and master³¹ that he come with me, as it is a great danger to go and ascend to the supernal worlds, whence I had never ascended since I acquired awareness, and these were mighty ascents. So I ascended degree after degree, until I entered the palace of the Messiah»³².

From the opening statement it becomes evident that this enterprise was not a unique event, but a practice both known to his brother-in-law, and cultivated by the Besht also on prior occasions. Another ascension of this figure is that of 1750, introduced by the phrase «and on Rosh ha-Shanah of 5510 I performed an ascent of soul, as it is known»³³. Again, the founder of Hasidism mentions that his experience is not an idiosyncratic one, but it has been known, at least in some closed circles: «as it is known». What seems to be interesting is the fact that in both cases, the ascension of the soul took place on the eve of the New Year. Is this occasion an especially propitious moment for knowing the future³⁴ ?

²⁷ *hashba'ah*. On this term see below beside note 58.

²⁸ The theory of a double Paradise is found in many places in Kabbalistic eschatology and it was accepted by the Besht; see the legend adduced by Martin BUBER, *Tales of the Hasidim, Early Masters* tr. Olga Marx, [New York, 1964] p. 84. See also the next note.

²⁹ The column linking the lower Paradise to other levels of reality is well-known from earlier Kabbalistic sources; see, e.g. *Seder Gan 'Eden* a pseudo-epigraphic midrash composed in fact by Rabbi Moses de Leon, printed in EISENSTEIN, *Otzar ha-Midrashim*, pp. 85-86. The motif of the pillar climbed by shamans or by dead souls recurs in various traditions; see e.g. the Judaeo-Arabic tradition on the ladder of the souls discussed by Alexander ALTMANN, "The Ladder of Ascension", *Studies in Mysticism and Religion presented to Gershom G. Scholem* [Jerusalem, 1967] pp. 1-32. According to a Hasidic legend, the last subject discussed by the Besht before his death was the pillar of the souls; see BUBER, *Tales of the Hasidim; Early Masters*, p. 84.

³⁰ Again, the impression is that the Besht does not abord a new theme but elaborates upon a topic known to the addressee.

³¹ Apparently Ahijah the Shilonite; on this prophet as a mystical mentor, see LIEBES, "The Messiah of the Zohar", p. 113, n. 114.

³² See *Shivehei ha-Besht*, ed. J. MONDSHEIN, pp. 235-236, Koretz version; IDEL, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, p. 94; COULIANO, *Out of this World*, p. 186.

³³ *Shivehei ha-Besht*, p. 237.

³⁴ That revelatory events happened in connection to Jewish Holidays seems to be a pattern: See Gershom SCHOLEM *Origins of the Kabbalah* tr. A. Arkush, ed. R. J. Zwi WERBLOWSKY, [Princeton, Philadelphia, 1987] pp. 240-241.

«I³⁵ asked the Messiah: When do you come? And he answered: You will know [the time] which is when your doctrine will be revealed in public and it will be disclosed to the world, and “your fountains will well outside”, what I have taught you and you apprehended, and also they³⁶ will be able to perform the unifications and the ascents [of the soul] as you do, and then the shells will be abolished³⁷ and then there will be a time of good-will and redemption. And I was surprised by this [answer] and I was deeply sorrowful because of the length of time when this will be possible; however, from what I have learned there, the three things which are remedies and three divine names, it is easy to learn and to explain. [Then] my mind was calmed and I thought that it is possible for my contemporaries³⁸ to attain this degree and aspect by these [practices], as I do, namely to be able to accomplish the ascents of souls and they will be able to study and become like me»³⁹.

This passage has been the subject of many learned analyzes and even of a small polemic between scholars of Hasidism⁴⁰. The thrust of this polemic is the divergences between a more messianic reading of the text, ushered by Ben Zion Dinur⁴¹ and elaborated, in a more critical way, by Isaiah Tishby⁴² and a much less messianic one, found in Scholem's writings⁴³. However, in spite of the interest expressed by the scholars in this small epistle,

³⁵ Namely the Besht.

³⁶ I.e. the people of Israel.

³⁷ This is a Lurianic description of the time of the redemption.

³⁸ *'Anshei gily*. This term is understood in a restrictive sense as the members of the circle of the Besht, by ETKES, “Hasidism as a Movement” p. 17. This understanding can be reinforced by a similar situation related to the Besht. In the Yiddish version of the *Praises of the Besht*, he asks his *hechste leit*, namely the highest among his people, to keep his special mystical practice, in secret as long as he is alive. See Abraham YA'ARI, “Two Basic Editions of Shivhei ha-Besht”, *Qiriat Sefer* vol. 39 [1964] p. 552, [Hebrew]. The Yiddish version uses a Hebrew term for mystical practice, *hanhagah*. More on this term see below. In the manuscript printed by Joshua MONDSHEIN, *Migdal 'Oz*, the phrase *'Anshei gily* does not appear and instead the phrase *'Anshei seggulah*, namely eminent people, occurs. See MONDSHEIN, *ibidem*, p. 124, note 10.

³⁹ See MONDSHEIN, *ibidem* p. 124.

⁴⁰ See, in addition to the references in the following three notes, also Dan Ben AMOS and J. R. MINZ, *In the Praise of Baal Shem Tov*, [London, 1970] p. 57, Mendel PIEKARZ, *Studies in Braslav Hasidism*, [Jerusalem, 1972] p. 66 [Hebrew]; Yehudah LIEBES, “The Messiah of the Zohar”, pp. 113-114; Emanuel ETKES, “Hasidism as a Movement”, pp. 16-17; Steven KATZ, “Models, Modeling and Mystical Training”, *Religion*, 12 [1982] p. 259; Abraham RUBINSTEIN, “The Mentor of the Besht and the Writings from which He Studied”, *Tarbiz*, vol. 48 [1978-1979] pp. 146-158, [Hebrew]; Gedaliah NIGAL, *Magic, Mysticism and Hasidism*, [Tel Aviv, 1992] p. 30 [Hebrew].

⁴¹ *Be-Mifneh ha-Dorot* [Jerusalem, 1955] pp. 181-184 [Hebrew].

⁴² *Studies in Kabbalah and Its Branches* [Jerusalem, 1993] vol. II pp. 503-507, [Hebrew].

⁴³ Gershom SCHOLEM, *The Messianic Idea in Israel*, [New York, 1972], pp. 182-184. On Scholem's side see R. J. Zwi WERBLOWSKY, “Mysticism and Messianism, the case of Hasidism”, *Man and His Salvation, Essays in Memory of S.G.F. Brandon*, Manchester, 1973, pp. 305-314 and Rivka SCHATZ UFFENHEIMER, *Hasidism as Mysticism. Quietistic Elements in Eighteenth Century Hasidic Thought*, tr. Jonathan Chipman, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, The Magnes Press, Jerusalem, 1993. The neutralization of messianism in Hasidism was already been advocated by Martin Buber's vision of Hasidism. For another approach see M. IDEL, *Messianic Dimension in Jewish Mysticism*, New Haven, London, 1998, ch. 7.

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many of its details remained unexamined. The eagerness to demonstrate the importance of this text for the messianic nature of Hasidism on one side, or of its irrelevance, given the other concept of Hasidism as neutralizing Messianism, has caused a neglect of some components of the text, which may have a certain importance for an effort to settle the above controversy. The analysis below will attempt to show that at least some details in it that describe the activity of the Besht concur the way medical magicians were conceived in his lifetime.

Let me start with the term *segullot*, “remedies”. Its medical aspect, *segullot*, which occurs together with the divine names is fostered also by an historical document that describes the Besht not only as a Kabbalist but also as *Doktor* and *Balsem* or *Balszam*⁴⁴. The two words which describe the Besht are to be found just after the designation of the Besht as a Kabbalist. Indeed, this pair of words seems to be part of a widespread way of describing similar persons. So, for example we find in the magical writing *Mif'alot 'Elohim*, attributed to Rabbi Yo'el ben Naftali Katz, a famous 17th century *magus*, described as *Ba'al Shem*, namely as the «*master of a [magical] name*» a quote from the «*writings of the Kabbalists*» which deals with medical astrology: there it is written that the astrological details «*are necessary both to the master of the name and to the doctor*»⁴⁵. Therefore, the pair of words in the Besht's revelation is relevant to the practice of the founder of Hasidism. However, despite the parallelism between the above phrases, the mention of the divine names together with *segullot*, is reminiscent of the introduction to *Shimmushei Torah* referred above. It is not only a question of linguistic precise similarity but also a similar context: in both cases the ascent on the high is mentioned. Like Moses, also the Besht ascended on the high and received names and remedies. But it seems that this similarity is not the single one between the introduction to *Shimmushei Torah* and Besht's epistle.

Let us inspect the possible meaning of this phrase «*your fountain will well outside*» occurring in the passage quoted above. Its source is a biblical verse: Proverb 5:16 and it may stand, as I assume indeed it is, for the dissemination of the Besht's teachings. Nevertheless, I wonder if this metaphorical understanding exhausts the meaning of this phrase. In a description of the Besht, again found in a writing of Rabbi Yizhaq Aiziq Safrin of Komarno, it is said, inter alia, that the wonders made by the Besht, were not «*heard from the days of the Tannaits... and a small word of his was a fountain of wisdom*»⁴⁶, a true principle for [the understanding of] all the writings of our master Yizhaq Luria... and he had comprehensions of the ascent of the soul, and ascent to the Pardes, the real comprehension of Rabbi Akiva and his companions»⁴⁷.

This comparison of the Besht with the Tannaits, either as wonder-makers or as mystics is relevant. The ascent to the *Pardes* is explicitly mentioned, and it seems that it was formative, at least as it has been understood by the Rabbi of Komarno – for the understanding of the extraordinary figure of the Besht. However, it seems that also the use of the phrase *ma'ayan hokhmah* is illuminating. This phrase is the title of several Kabbalistic books, but what seems to be especially pertinent in our context is the fact that this is also the title of the introduction to *Sefer Shimmushei ha-Torah*, where the divine names and the remedies are mentioned as revealed to Moses. Moreover, it is in a writing

⁴⁴ See the document printed and analyzed by Murray J. ROSMAN, “Miedzyboz and Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov”, in ed. G.D. HUNDERT, *Essential Papers on Hasidism* [New York, London, 1991] p. 217.

⁴⁵ [Zolkiew, 1865] no pagination, under the rubric *Kokhavim*.

⁴⁶ *Ma'ayan hokhmah*.

⁴⁷ *Notzer Hesed* [Jerusalem, 1982] p. 131. See also IDEL, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, p. 95.

from the *Heikhalot* literature, the so-called *Hebrew Enoch* that this phrase occurs, and there it stands for a mythical entity, found in the supernal world⁴⁸. Related phrases are found in a variety of Rabbinic sources in the context of exceptional creativity⁴⁹. However, it seems that the occurrence of this phrase in the Besht's epistle in the context of the ascent on the high, may point to an affinity with those texts in late antiquity where the ascent on the high is important. What may be the significance of the Rabbi of Komarno's assumption that one «*small word*» of the Besht can become a clue for Lurianic Kabbalah? Again, this may be part of the exaggerated hagiography that surrounded the historical figure of the Besht. However, when comparing this description to the epistle, it seems that the divine names may be a good candidate for a small word that is also a clue for Lurianic thought.

The power of remedies, apparently popular magical recipes, and of the divine names constitute, therefore, nothing new. The Besht's recourse to these topics in his epistle can be seen from a double perspective: an unconscious attempt to enhance his reputation as a doctor, whose techniques were revealed from above, or at least recommended by the highest authority. On the other hand, the Besht resorted to an authoritative text, *Shimmushei Torah*, which mentions the techniques used by him as having been revealed to no other authority than Moses. By the dint of these two reasons, the dissemination of the lore, or knowledge of the Besht, will have an eschatological significance: people will be able to heal themselves, and according to another detail of the epistle, to perform ascents on the high as the Besht has done. It is the reproduction of the attainment of the Besht that is tantamount to redemption. Thus, we should pay attention to the content of the *eschaton* as described here: it will consist in a change in nature, but this will be the human nature that will be healed, rather than a dramatic shift in history. The healing of the body and the perfection of the soul by its ascent to the high are the definition of the *eschaton*. Thus, it seems that Dinur's and Tishby's emphasis on the historical eschatology as hinted at here is not corroborated by the present analysis. On the other hand, Scholem's attempt to get rid of the eschatological content is also not a sufficient explanation: the Messiah is indeed addressed by the Besht, and he actually offers a scheme for the further developments. However, this is a non-historical, non-political and non-geographical eschatology, but it is an eschatology after all, understood by the main parameters of the Besht's activity. The spiritual experience of the ascension, and the well-being of the body achieved, according to the epistle, by magical means, can be attained by the very few already in the lifetime of the Besht, and in general the Messianic time is envisaged as an accumulative achievement of individuals, but hardly as the result of the advent or the activity of the redeemer. To a certain extent, this view of Messianism is reminiscent, from the phenomenological point of view, that of Abraham Abulafia, who believed that the dissemination of his ecstatic Kabbalah, based on combinations of letters and divine names, will enable the whole nation to reach a spiritual state which is tantamount to Messianism⁵⁰.

⁴⁸ See Ms. Oxford 1748, fol. 28a and in Hugo ODEBERG's edition *3 Enoch or the Hebrew Book of Enoch* (reprinted New York, 1973), p. 16, where the «*well of all secrets of the Torah and the secrets of the wisdom*» is mentioned.

I hope to elaborate more on the metamorphosis of this phrase elsewhere.

⁴⁹ See Alon GOSHEN-GOTTSTEIN, "Rabbi Eleazar ben 'Arakh: Symbol and Reality", *Jews and Judaism during the Period of the Second Temple, of the Mishnah and of the Talmud* eds. A. OFFENHEIMER, I. GAFNI, M. STERN [Jerusalem, 1993] pp. 173-197, [Hebrew].

⁵⁰ See Moshe IDEL, *Messianism and Mysticism* [Tel Aviv, 1992] pp. 20-31, [Hebrew].

III

The beginning of the Hasidic movement is related to the so-called revelation of the Besht, namely the disclosure of his “real” nature. Part of the period before his revelation was spent in the Northern part of the Carpathian mountains. It was, according to the legend, there that the Besht shifted to a more open and intensively public activity, after spending years in solitude⁵¹. We may assume that a secret mystical path, known by the Besht and by his companions, was kept away from the masses. Moreover, in the epistle, the techniques of the Besht were explicitly related to ascents of the soul. In the Yiddish version of the legend that has been quoted above the utter concentration of the thought of the Besht has been mentioned; this concentration is so intensive that the Besht is described as being out of this world⁵². In these cases, ecstatic, or trance-like experiences were related to a certain way of life, *hitbodedut* and *hanhagah* on one hand, and a certain type of *Yihudim* on the other⁵³. The *hanhagah*, namely the *regimen vitae*, of the Besht is mentioned as if it was a quite articulated issue in a book of the Besht's acquaintance, Rabbi Meir Margoliot⁵⁴. I assume that these mystical practices can be traced to earlier Jewish sources. However, the emphasis on the ascent on the high and on mystical states of consciousness deserve more consideration. The first-person account of the ascent of the soul is a rather rare phenomenon in Jewish mysticism: a confession that contains not only the name of the person but also the precise date is not characteristic of the reports on the ascensions before the time of the Besht I am acquainted with.

Interestingly enough, ecstatic practices in which the soul is described as leaving the body for several hours, during which oracular dreams were experienced, were known in Moldavian Carpathian Mountains⁵⁵. Though this is, indubitably, a very ancient Eurasian practice, as it has been analyzed more recently by Carlo Ginzburg⁵⁶, it may be relevant for our discussion that evidence concerning such a practice was brought by a Catholic friar, Marcus Bandinus, regarding the middle 17th century Moldavian area close to the Carpathian Mountains, more precisely the region of Bacău, around the year 1648. This author mentions the *incantatores*⁵⁷ a term reminiscent of the Besht's term «*incantation*» in the quote from his epistle brought above⁵⁸. Moreover, while the ancient ecstatic practices did not enjoy a very positive reception in Christian Europe, in this particular area alone⁵⁹

⁵¹ See Shimeon DUBNOW, *The History of Hasidism* [Tel Aviv, 1967] p. 46, [Hebrew].

⁵² See Moshe ROSMAN, *Founder of Hasidism. A Quest for the Historical Ba'al Shem Tov*, Berkeley, Los Angeles – London, 1996, pp. 191, 193-194, 205-208.

⁵³ M. IDEL, *Hasidism*, p. 163.

⁵⁴ *Sod Yakhin u-Vo'az*, Jerusalem, 1990, p. 41; see also the additions to *Keter Shem Tov*, Brooklyn, 1987, fols. 113a-114b. An interesting passage, printed in the name of Rabbi Aharon of Zhitomir, an early 19th century Hasidic master, in Rabbi Yehoshu'a Abraham ben Yisrael's *Ge'ulat Yisrael*, [Amsterdam, 1821] fol. 17c, deals with some of the elements mentioned above, as part of an allegedly secret tradition stemming from Ahijah the Shilonite, and transmitted to the Besht, the Great Maggid and R. Levi Yitzhaq of Berditchev. See also IDEL, *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic*, pp. 176-177.

⁵⁵ See Mircea ELIADE, *Zalmoxis; The Vanishing God* tr. W.R. Trask, (Chicago-London, 1970), pp. 191-194.

⁵⁶ *Ecstasies, Deciphering the Witches' Sabbat*, tr. Raymond Rosenthal, [Pantheon, New York, 1991], COULIANO, *Out of this World*, pp. 47-49.

⁵⁷ ELIADE, *Zalmoxis*, pp. 191-194; GINZBURG, *Ecstasies*, pp. 188, 189, 194, 199.

⁵⁸ See note 27 above.

⁵⁹ According to Eliade, the phenomenon of *incantatores* is unknown in Rumania outside the Moldavian Carpathians. See *ibidem*, p. 194.

the *incantatores* have been highly regarded and conceived to be, according to Bandinus's formulations, as the *doctores subtilissimi et sanctissimi* are in Italy⁶⁰. Moreover, the ecstatic practices were not restricted to the few, but were allowed to everyone⁶¹. Thus, less than a century before the revelation of the Besht, in an area in the immediate vicinity of the places where the founder of Hasidism spent some period in solitude, practices similar to his ascent to heaven were known and performed by Gentiles. These practices have nothing to do with Jewish sources, but stem from the Eurasian religious heritage. However, as I have attempted to point out in some of the prior discussions, it is possible to pinpoint similar practices to those of the Besht in the earlier layers of Jewish mysticism, some of them formulated in areas remote from the Eurasian zone. What may, therefore be the significance of the coexistence of similar practices in practically the same period and geographical area? I see no simple answer to this question. In general, the Jewish mystical techniques still wait for more detailed descriptions and analyzes. However, a preliminary answer would be that I see in the Besht's ascension of the soul, as well in those of his contemporaries I shall mention below, a resurgence of a Jewish mystical practice, in existence for centuries, at least insofar as the literary sources are relating, but receiving a special impetus precisely in these Carpathian areas. In other words, one aspect of Hasidism, an emphasis upon the ascent of the soul, can be attributed to the consonance between the Jewish mystical traditions found in much earlier sources and some mystical-magical practices en vogue in the geographical area Hasidism emerged⁶².

It seems that as late as the second half of the 18th century, the ascent *in spiritu* on the high was not only a matter of the founder of Hasidism. At least in two contemporary texts from East Europe, this topic recurs: Rabbi Yehiel Mikhal, the Maggid of Zlotchov, an acquaintance of the Besht was reported as sleeping only for some few reasons, one of them being the creation of the opportunity of ascending to the firmament⁶³. This technique was known, reportedly practiced, though not very highly appreciated, by the great opponent of Hasidism, Rabbi Eliahu, the *Gaon* of Vilna⁶⁴. It seems that in matters of religion there are not only changes but also continuities that may allow the emergence of similar phenomena in 18th century Carpathian regions to those found in Palestine of late antiquity.

IV

Let me address now some methodological questions. The epistle quoted above is a rather variegated and multifaceted document. Its understanding involves many aspects, starting with the question of its versions⁶⁵, its historicity, namely whether it has indeed been written by the Besht, as well as the question if it is a reliable testimony insofar many other details are involved. Here I would like to draw attention to the affinity of quotes brought above to the apocalyptic genre. In his definition of this genre, J. Collins asserts that

⁶⁰ ELIADE, *ibidem*, pp. 191-192.

⁶¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 191, 193.

⁶² It should be emphasized that I do not attribute to this consonance the emergence of Hasidism as a movement, but only of the emphases on the ascent on the high.

⁶³ See in the collection of material related to Rabbi Yehiel Mikhal, *Mayyim Rabim* [Brooklyn, 1979] p. 140.

⁶⁴ See Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin's introduction to his master's *Commentary on Sifra' de-Zeni'uta'* [Vilna, 1891].

⁶⁵ On this question see M. ROSMAN, *Founder of Hasidism*, pp. 97-113.

ASCENT OF THE SOUL IN EARLY HASIDISM

«Apocalypse is a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendental reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world»⁶⁶.

The Messiah is the mediating and revealing being, who discloses in the celestial paradise the secrets of the end. From this point of view the epistle of the Besht meets parameters proposed by Collins. However, as we have mentioned above, salvation in our case is not precisely a given date, when the redeemer will advent, but an evolving state when both the mystical ascent of the soul and the magical aspect of the model mentioned above, will be disseminated in larger audiences. “Eschatological salvation” stands here for the gradual implementation of the two aspects of the mystical-magical model. Pointing out the affinities between the ancient Jewish texts and the Hasidic passage, either from the point of view of literary genre or of concepts should, in my opinion, mean more than a philological enterprise, namely pinpointing the precise source of some phrases in a certain text. If the above affinities are meaningful, this may be because the philological links may point to a more phenomenological similarity. The ascent on the high as portrayed by the Besht owes much not only to medieval and Renaissance Jewish texts, but also to ancient ones. What are the implications of such a claim for the more general picture of Jewish mysticism? The more historical organization of the Jewish mystical, what I proposed to call “external history”⁶⁷, is just one meaningful way to approach the treatment of the mystical material.

Another approach, the phenomenological one, may be understood as significant as the historical one; the ascent on the high is just one instance for the possible contribution of transcending the historical approach in order to be able to find out not only what are the differences caused as the result of the historical transmission and development, but also what is the common core of the phenomena. Pinpointing the basic phenomena of a certain type of literature and describing their reverberations may be seen as the inner history of a certain literature. Here we have adopted a more specific type of phenomenological approach: the assumption that some few models are articulating the main conceptual structure of Jewish mysticism, and in our case the mystical-magical model crosses the borders of the various types of Jewish mystical literature.

⁶⁶ See J.J. COLLINS, “Introduction: Toward the Morphology of a Genre” dans J.J. COLLINS ed. *Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre, Semeia* vol. 14 [1979] p. 9 and CULIANU, *Psychanodia*, p. 5.

⁶⁷ Moshe IDEL, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, p. XIII.