

# On Talismanic Language in Jewish Mysticism

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Linguistic magic can be divided into three major categories: the fiat, the Orphic and the talismanic. The first category includes the creation of the signified by its signifier, the best example being the creation of the world by divine words. The Orphic category assumes the possibility of enchanting an already existing entity by means of vocal material. Last but not least is the talismanic, based on the drawing of energy by means of language, in order to use this energy for magical purposes. While the fiat view assumes the complete superiority of the creator over the created object, the Orphic presupposes a certain similarity between the subject-magician and its object, whose role is to understand and follow the instructions of the magician. In these two categories meaning seems to be a crucial part of the magical linguistic activities. In the third category, the talismanic, linguistic powers are used in order to summon higher powers which then descend to take possession of it. By talismanic I refer to the inherent ability of an entity, material, a moment in time, or a human act to draw upon these powers. Unlike amulets, which are usually taken to be objects that protect their possessor, the talisman is able to *add* power.

## Divine and Human Names as Talismans

Ever since the Biblical interdiction against using the divine name in vain, an entire mystical and magical tradition related to this topic has developed. The holiness of this name has very rarely been explained in detail in the ancient Jewish sources. Medieval sources however, abound in various attempts to account for this

particular feature of the letters that comprise the divine names. Some of these explanations involve magical aspects,<sup>1</sup> but for our purposes we shall explore only the talismanic quality of the name. The first source in Hebrew to give clear-cut expression to this point of view is found in one of the most famous tracts on magic of the Middle Ages. In the Hebrew version of the notorious magical treatise entitled *Picatrix*, or *Takhlit he-Hakham*, it is stated that, according to Aristotle,

in ancient times, divine names had a certain ability to bring spiritual forces to bear down on earth. At times, these forces would come down ... and he said that the incantation of sorcery [lahash ha-kishshuf] would not go beyond the realm of this world.<sup>2</sup>

According to the context this quote, trust in God is crucial for the success of verbal activity, because God is the agent that enacts the spiritual forces and commands them to descend. The claim that the incantation does not transcend the mundane realm is important because it implies we are not speaking of an Orphic type of magic – namely, a persuasion of the celestial powers – but rather of powers that descend into this world upon the divine names. *Picatrix*, which had a considerable influence on Renaissance magic (as has been pointed out by Yates and Garin),<sup>3</sup> had a definite impact on Jewish authors as well. Although it can not be stated with certainty, it would seem that this magical treatise is the source of the views of several Jewish authors. For example, the late 16th century Kabbalist, Rabbi Menahem Azariah of Fano, who elaborated upon the talismanic conception of names, insisted that the names of righteous persons have a talismanic “preparation,” a point that influenced subsequent developments in Jewish mystical talismanics :

There is a great preparation inherent in the names of the righteous [which enables] the dwelling of the divine to overflow on them as it is written:<sup>4</sup> “See, I have called you by name,” and only afterward [as it is written in the next verse] “I shall fill him with the spirit of God.”<sup>5</sup>

This view is to be understood, as the author himself points out, in the context of another discussion found in the same book. Here it is stated that Adam’s giving names to all the creatures is tantamount to the “completion of their form”, *gemar tzurato*. As an intermediary of God’s will, Adam had completed the forms in order “to accomplish the preservation of the species.” Thus, the names of

creatures were conceived in ontological terms, namely to give the final touch to a created entity. In fact, in some of the passages dealing with the giving of names, this Kabbalist assumes that Adam obtained mastery over the creatures by conferring names upon them: he uses the noun *pequdah*. If I correctly understand one of his other statements, the entities that receive the names in part conserve Adam's spirit as well. We may assume that though all the names reflect, according to this Kabbalist, the essence of the things they designate, the names of the righteous are endowed with a special quality, that of attracting celestial power to them. In his compendium of Rabbi Moshe Cordovero's *Pardes Rimmonim*, called the *Pelah ha-Rimmon*, Rabbi Menahem Azariah of Fano asserts that:

the spiritual force of the *Sefiroth* is brought down and shines upon the names by dint of the [mystical] intention of the copyist or the person who pronounces [it] on his lips in holiness and purity.<sup>6</sup>

Although this passage touches upon the divine names, what is crucial for our discussion is the fact that the celestial forces are induced to descend into the linguistic material through the mystical intention that may accompany the act of writing or speaking. The talismanic nature is, therefore, not an actual property of the divine names but a quality *in potentia*, which can be actualized by certain expert persons. This understanding of the proper names of the *Zaddik*, who is believed to possess magical qualities, did not remain a matter of theory. According to one report, the founder of Hasidism – the *Besht* – used his own name in the amulets he prepared. Although the magical use of the proper name is not necessarily explained by talismanic theory, it is surely plausible. At the beginning of the 19th century, a follower of Rabbi Levi Yitzhaq of Berditchev, an important Hasidic master, asserted that:

the letters of the name of each and every *Zaddik* are little channels, *tzinoriot*, which receive the effluvia and bring them downward. This is why when someone cares for the names of the *Zaddiks* in the Torah – such as Adam, Seth, Enoch, Metushalem and Noah –, and understands which aspect of the divinity the righteous worshipped, and he too worships God in just this way, in holiness, cleanliness and awe, he will be able to draw down upon himself this holiness and intellectual understanding, which [belongs] to that righteous, by means of his name, and which is the channel of the effluvia.<sup>7</sup>

The names of the righteous ones in the Bible represent, implicitly, different forms of worship and different channels for drawing

down emanations – emanations that apparently correspond to the worship addressed to different aspects of the divine. The prerequisites mentioned in connection with the study of these names – holiness, cleanliness, and awe – are reminiscent, to a certain extent, of magical preparations. Moreover, the belief that the names of the Biblical figures have talismanic properties is reminiscent of the use, on Muslim talismans, of the various Koranic proper names of the “prophets,” some of which stem from the Bible. Another important Hasidic master, Rabbi Elimelekh of Lisansk, believed that someone could become a Zaddik just by being called by the name Zaddik and that this caused a lightening of the light of the Zaddik in the upper world. This view, which is often expressed in various texts, assumes that the names of the righteous are tantamount, or at least similar, to divine names, which were understood to function talismanically.

### The Talismanic Interpretation of Language

While the above quotes deal with special names, envisioned as possessing the talismanic quality, there are many passages where Jewish authors conceived of the Hebrew language itself as possessing this quality. This means that language is found on the supermundane level, and that the correspondence between linguistic activities and supernal language is to be understood in a talismanic manner. The most explicit discussions of the quasi-astral status of the letters are to be found in several passages authored by Rabbi Yohanan Alemanno, a companion and teacher of Pico della Mirandola. In one instance, the ontological status of the concept of “the world of letters” is described as part of a more comprehensive “spiritual world”:

The world of the spiritual forces, existing beneath the heavens, is not perceived by the senses: the world of heavenly angels is not known by syllogisms; the world of the letters is not seen in the marketplace; and the world of the *sefirot* are not perceived as are other perceptibles.<sup>8</sup>

This ontological hierarchy is paralleled by an epistemological one: the spiritual forces, the angels – that is, namely those angels that move the spheres according to Avicenna –, the letters and the

*sefiroth* are not perceived by the senses, by syllogisms, by the sight or by the intellect. In this ascending ladder the world of the letters is posited just beneath the sefirothic world and higher than the celestial bodies and their forces. In a different context Alemanno asserts that the *sefiroth* and the vowels are the souls of the letters. In fact, the *sefiroth* play, he says, a role similar to that played by the separate intellects in relation to the cosmic spheres. In other words, the world of language transcends the spiritual forces belonging to the celestial world. It should be noted, however, that elsewhere Alemanno describes three of the four higher worlds mentioned here as belonging to the spiritual world.

As different as the world of letters may be from the celestial powers, at least insofar as its over-all shape is concerned, the two evidently share a common anthropomorphic structure. This can be seen by comparing two passages dealing with this issue in Alemanno's *'Einei ha-'Edah* and *Hesheq Shelomo*. In the former, the shape of the lower man, *Adam tahton*, reflects the shape of the celestial man, which is also reflected in the median world, formed of "stars, zodiacal signs, and letters". This formal affinity between all the worlds, expressed in the anthropomorphic shape, is frequently asserted in the Kabbalah: what is important here is that the world of the letters is conceived of as an anthropomorphic structure. Alemanno elaborates on this view elsewhere, in a passage that attempts to offer *Sefer Yetzirah* itself as the source of the above hierarchy.

The special status of man as the quintessence of all the worlds, reminiscent as it may be of the dignity of man as understood by Pico della Mirandola, seems nevertheless to stem from other sources. What is crucial in this context is the explicit correspondence between the celestial world of letters – which stands in between the worlds of the *sefiroth* and the spheres – and that of human, earthly utterances. This cosmic correspondence assumes a certain sympathy between the various levels of existence, which can be manipulated talismanically, as we shall see below. In his *Collectanaea*, Alemanno quotes the following passage from Cladius Ptolemy's *Centiloquium* :

The forms of the world of composition obey the forms of the spheres. This is why the masters of the talismans draw the forms of the spheres: in order to receive the emanation of the stars onto the object they intend to operate with.<sup>9</sup>

In this quote, as in related ones, the pertinent relations are between lower entities – animal, mineral, and vegetal – and their corresponding celestial powers. It seems that only in the Jewish milieu was the correspondence between human and celestial language perceived. Alemanno comments on the above quote in the following terms:

This is the secret of the “world of letters”: they are forms and seals [made in order] to collect the supernal and spiritual emanation just as the seals collect the emanations of the stars.<sup>10</sup>

In this text the “the world of the letters” is not conceived of in ontological terms: rather it is expressed in talismanic letters here below, which function like the seals, described as a means of collecting supernal emanations. However, in other contexts, Alemanno uses the same phrase in order to designate the spiritual world, which is identical to the world of the divine names. Thus the lower world of letters can be conceived of as collecting, by virtue of a sympathetic affinity, the effluvia emanating from the celestial world of letters. For our purposes it is important to stress that the astro-magical pattern has been translated into the world of language. Just as regular talismans collect the celestial influx emanating from the astral realm, language too functions talismanically, collecting an even higher form of the effluvia: while the material talismans or seals collect the influx of the celestial bodies, the linguistic seals collect the influx of the celestial world of letters. This talismanic understanding of language is corroborated by a very important passage in Alemanno where Moses himself is described in terms of linguistic talismanics:

Moses ... had precise knowledge of the spiritual world which is called the world of the *Sefiroth*, and divine names, or the world of letters. Moses knew how to direct his thoughts and prayers, so as to improve the influx ... By means of this influx he could create anything he wished, just as God created the world by various emanations. When he wanted to perform signs and wonders, Moses would pray and utter divine names, words and meditations ... The emanations then descended into the world and created new supernatural things.<sup>11</sup>

Once again the “world of letters” has been identified with the divine names, and the activation of this world is realized through utterance of “divine names, words and meditations”. According to Alemanno, language functions as a means of collecting the influx

from above; therefore linguistic activity here below is to be understood talismanically. This is the way that Alemanno understands both the Torah and prayer. In this connection he makes some very interesting observations about the three types of prayers:

a) Prayers performed by persons who know nothing about the things of which they are speaking, and who do not pray out of choice or free will but because of ancestral custom. [These prayers] receive the influxes that descend onto them because of the existence of human voices, which are arranged in such a way as to be worthy of receiving the influxes. These influxes are ready to descend onto them even if the performers [of the prayers] do not prepare them with [proper] intention, or [pray] not from choice or free will but as a blind man wanders in the dark. This is exactly as it is with the [four] elements that receive the influxes when they [the elements] are prepared and ordered ... [b] The prayers of the persons who choose certain times, and who arise at [these] times in order to pray and supplicate. They do so despite the fact that they do not know what they speak, and do not understand how they exalt and praise, and by what power their words operate on high, and what are the things that stir the influxes or what are those that stir them not. Despite the fact that they only follow in the footsteps of the ancients and pray their prayers, they too receive the influxes that are ready to come onto those prayers in accordance with those preparations; and these prayers are slightly better than those of the first, because of the choice. This is just how the animal soul receives the influxes on its deeds ... [c] The prayers of the illuminati, [*ha-'anashim ha-maskilim*] who know what prayer is appropriate to what influx, and [also] know the manner of the influxes and the manner of the lower preparations. On them will dwell influxes that are more sublime than the previous ones, because they have knowledge of the correct and appropriate way to prepare all these issues. This is how it is with human souls, who receive the influxes in accordance with their deeds and with the questions they perceive.<sup>12</sup>

The talismanic quality does not, therefore, depend upon mental activity, and the prayers will be effective even if one is not aware of their meaning. This is formulated in a rather explicit manner elsewhere in Alemanno, when he points out that according to the Kabbalists,

utterances affect existent beings by [creating] wondrous operations, without conceptualization or thought, but [merely] by means of activating the sources of the voice, which have the inherent ability to affect the hyle or universal matter. This is because of its motion, just as the spheres have the power to act upon it [the hyle] by means of motion and by the combination of the alternating motions of the stars. According to this [principle] it is possible to understand and to believe what has been indicated by the sages of the gentiles, such as Apollonius, in his [book] *The Magical Arts*, and by Albertus Magnus, in *Pile'ot 'Olam*, [Wonders of the World] [adducing matters] in the name of Avicenna and Hypocrates, and other ancient sages.<sup>13</sup>

Thus the mechanics of speech alone can activate the hylic nature through the energy emanated in the act of utterance. This seems, according to Alemanno, to be the principal cause of the linguistic magic described by classic gentile and Jewish sources. Alemanno assumes that just as the spheres leave an impression on the mundane world solely through their motions, so does human articulation affect this world by releasing energy without any strict necessity for an act of thinking. However, as we shall see below, Alemanno understands human speech to be the manipulation of the speech organs by the cosmic agent intellect. The human intellect is apparently but a medium and the speaking person need not be aware of the cognitive aspect of his activity.

Let us return to the quote on prayer: What is crucial for enhancing the power of prayer is knowledge of the correspondences between a particular prayer, time and the kind of the influx that the person who is praying would like to attract. By mastering this gnosis, astrological in nature, a person will be able to pray more effectively than someone who is ignorant. Indeed, according to another very important insight by the same author, letters exist on three levels: within the divine spirit, in the world – including the human mouth –, and finally as written characters. Even in the latter two cases the letters still retain a “vitality,” (*hiyyut*), which is identical to the “divine power,” (*koah ‘Elohi*) and this is the why an utterance can compel

spiritual forces, pure or impure, to do their will ... and on this [principle] all prayers and blessings are built.<sup>14</sup>

Thus the powerful Hebrew language – because Alemanno intends explicitly to describe only Hebrew – unifies both the “speech” (*be-dibburam*) and the canonic liturgical texts, endowing both with magical qualities. It is my view that the correspondence between the three levels has a talismanic role, since Alemanno explicitly discusses the “causing of the descent” of the powers of the celestial letters.

The double meaning that Alemanno attributes to the term ‘*Olam ha-’Otyiot*’ seems to reflect both the ontological view of this concept in the theosophical Kabbalah, and the manipulative one found in the ecstatic Kabbalah. It would seem that Alemanno is



the first thinker to offer a thorough-going synthesis of the two different ways the term “world of letters” had been used in the two types of Kabbalah. This synthesis, based on an implied parallelism between the two Kabbalahs, is a good example of the efficacy of a panoramic approach to the development of Kabbalah: in many cases latter Kabbalists are acquainted not only with the last phase of the history of Kabbalah but know many layers of the tradition. They are thus able to draw on this knowledge when formulating their own views.

Alemanno’s talismanic attitude to language seems to have antecedents in Jewish mysticism, such as the earlier Kabbalistic sources quoted and analyzed above. At the same it is quite possible that the writings on talismanics translated by Marsilio Ficino in Florence influenced Alemanno. Alemanno was for many years an inhabitant of Florence and was close, at least for a time, to Pico della Mirandola and perhaps to his circle, as the *laudatio* of Lorenzo de Medici seems to prove. Thus in addition to the Jewish sources, which were influential on Alemanno’s views of language, we may assume that Neoplatonic and Hermetic views concerning the concept of *vis verbis* had an impact on him. By the same token we should not ignore the possibility that the Jewish sources, in addition to Hellenistic ones, had an influence on the magical vision of language found in Christian sources. This is obvious insofar as Kabbalistic writings were translated, studied and quoted by the Christian Kabbalists, such as Pico della Mirandola, Johann Reuchlin or Cornelius Agrippa of Nettesheim. These Christian Kabbalists, like many others, were especially attracted by the magical view of language and were well acquainted with the Kabbalah. Thus the above-quoted writings of Alemanno can be seen as contributing both to our understanding of Renaissance attitudes to magical language and, in some cases, offer a possible source for some of the formulations occurring in this period among Christian thinkers.

Alemanno’s interesting combination of the Abulafian theory of permutating letters with the concept of drawing down spiritual forces for both mystical and magical purposes was apparently not very influential beyond Northern Italy. However, a talismanic view of letters, though not of their permutations, was already pre-

sent in the works of a Spanish Kabbalist, Rabbi Shem Tov ben Shem Tov. This work was copied and elaborated upon by other Sephardic authors, such as the Rabbis Shelomo Alkabetz and Moshe Cordovero. The latter combined an astro-magical vision of language with Abraham Abulafia's theory of permutations of letters, creating again – probably independent of Alemanno's earlier synthesis – an astro-magical combinatory view of language and prayer. Some instances of the Sephardic Kabbalistic discussion will be mentioned below. It should, however, be emphasized that unlike Alemanno's talismanics, which were deeply affected by philosophy – as the recurrence of the concept of the Agent Intellect proves –, the Sephardic authors were influenced instead by the book of the Zohar. As a result, their unified universe included a more dynamic and mythical vision of the metaphysical starting point, the ten *Sefiroth*. In looking at the above texts, which were written from the 14th to early 16th century, we can see that one particular point is constantly emphasized: the inherent ability of the letters to act independently of human knowledge, although such knowledge can improve their performance. However, apart from the particular gnosis of the inherent qualities of the letters, it seems that no special religious attitude is required by the Jewish texts. Indeed, although trust in God is mentioned as necessary in the quote from *Picatrix*, this position was apparently not accepted by the Kabbalists. After the middle of the 16th century, and in especially in 18th century Hasidism, the emotional aspects began to be viewed as more and more necessary: devotion, enthusiasm, and ardent love are sometimes conceived as spiritual qualities that *must* accompany the performance of the linguistic acts. This change is particularly important for the more mystical side of the magical linguistic. At the same time there existed, in the Medieval Jewish texts, more pagan versions of talismanics, some of them translated from Arabic, such as *Takhlit he-Hakham*, or influenced by Arabic sources, such as the Pseudo-Ibn Ezra's *Sefer ha-'Atzamim*, and still other Jewish Renaissance texts that were influenced by the Arabic sources. However, starting with the Safedian sources, these "pagan" aspects were substantially reduced. Instead of a heavy reliance on the material aspects of the talismanic rituals – such as the sacrifices of animals, which is described at length in

*Picatrix* –, a much greater emphasis was placed, at least after the 16th century, on the devotional aspects of the ritual. Indeed in these later texts the language and body of the talismanic operator, the Zaddik, becomes more prominent: in this way the emphasis shifts from external objects and acts, such as sacrifices and fumigations, to the role of human emotion as the source of the drawing down operation.

## Divine Names and Inverted Talismatics

For the most part the talismanic understanding of language presupposes a celestial source of energy, which is collected here-below through the performance of liturgical texts. The assumption is that there exists some hidden affinity between letters and sounds and the higher beings, which are also the source of these spiritual forces. Whether these sources are astral bodies, as in the Arabic and Jewish texts, or the ten *sefiroth*, as in certain Kabbalistic texts, the link between linguistic units and higher beings is crucial. However, in some texts there is a phenomenon I propose to designate as “inverted talismatics”: the *Sefiroth*, that is to say the divine attributes, are conceived of as the recipients of a human spiritual power instilled in the letters by man’s activity, itself considered to be the source of this energy. If linguistic entities are regarded as a meso-cosmos, mediating between the spiritual and material realms or, roughly speaking, between God and man

... when you shall think upon something which points to the *Keter* and pronounce it with your mouth, you shall direct [your thought] to and visualize the name YHWH between your eyes with this vocalization, which is the *Qammatz* under all the consonants, its visualization being white as snow. And he (!) will direct [your thought] so that the letters will move and fly up into the air, and the entire secret is hinted at in the verse, “I have set the Divine Name always before me.” [Ps 16:8] <sup>15</sup>

The visualization of the Tetragrammaton in a certain color, which accompanies the pronunciation of a word corresponding to a certain *sefirah*, causes the ascent of the letters to that *sefirah*. The connection between the letters and the *sefiroth* is ensured by affinities that need not concern us here. What is important for our discussion is the fact that the letters absorb the human energy and

ascend, by the dint of the preestablished affinity, to their proper place in the divine realm.

### Cordovero's Synthesis: Normal and Inverted Talismanics

While in the anonymous Kabbalistic *responsum* the inverted talismanics is to a certain degree metaphorical, in some writings of Rabbi Moshe Cordovero the inverted talismanics is actually connected to the ordinary talismanics. So, for example, he claims that

There is no doubt that the letters that compose each and every pericope of the pericopes of the Torah, and every *Gemara'* and chapter [*Pereq*] being studied, and which concern a certain commandment [*Mitzwah*], have a spiritual reality that ascends and clings to the branches of this *sefirah*, namely that [particular] *sefirah* that hints at that *Mitzwah*, and when the person studies the [corresponding] *Mitzwah* or the chapter or the pericope or the verse, those letters will move and stir "on high," on this reality [*Metziy'ut*], by means of a "voice" and a "speech" which are *Tiferet* and *Malkhut* and *Mahashavah* and *Re'uta' de-Libba'* ... since *Mahashavah* and *Re'uta' de-Libba'* are like a soul to the "speech" and to the "voice", which are the [lower] soul [*Nefesh*] and the spirit [*Ruah*]. And behold, the voices and realities of the letters [produced by] the twist of the lips bestow on them a certain act and movement [like that] of a body. And the reality of the letters ascends and is found everywhere on the way of their ascent from one aspect to another, following the way of the [descending] emanation from one stage to another.<sup>16</sup>

Cordovero's concept of ascending letters as part of mystico-magical prayer, which is found here and in many other instances, influenced Hasidism. This can be seen in the following excerpt from Rabbi Jacob Joseph of Polonoy, one of the most important disciples of the *Besht*, who says about the intention of prayer that

The quintessence of the [mystical] intention [of prayer] is that the person who prays should direct his intention to cause the descent of the spiritual force from the celestial degrees onto the letters he pronounces, so that these letters will be able to ascend to the celestial degree, in order to carry out his request.<sup>17</sup>

In the middle of the 19th century, an important Hasidic figure, Rabbi Isaac Aizik Yehiel Safrin of Komarno, offers what can be described as one of the most elaborate expositions of Cordovero's theory of talismanic language:

The holy letters possess the inner, spiritual force and vitality of the world. Each of these letters has a spiritual form, a sublime light descending from

the very essence of the *Sefiroth*, coming down – degree by degree – until the light is clothed within the letter on his lips and the lips have within them the celestial light; thus, from the vapors of his mouth supernal and holy forms emerge, linked to their source, to the very essence of the emanation. When one refrains from speaking idle things, his voice will be heard in the celestial heavens, just as if he were one of the prophets. And it is incumbent upon him to draw down the spiritual force onto the sounds being pronounced, so that he will be able to elevate these letters to the highest rank. The human mouth, which is the seat of speech, voice and vapor, is itself spiritual, and onto this spiritual power we should draw down the supernal spirit force, so that by dint of this power the letters will be elevated on high. This is achieved by means of devotion, joy, love and fear ... and so do the sounds ascend and hasten to perform his request.<sup>18</sup>

This view of the talismanic quality of language, the spoken sounds, was inherited almost verbatim either from Cordovero's *Pardes Rimmonim* or from later variants within the Hasidic movement. Still following the Safedian master, these Hasidic masters believed that the spiritual force that descended upon the sound provided the power to elevate both the sound and the vapor on high. Talismanics therefore involves not only the creation of a vocal substratum for the dwelling of the celestial power in order to enwrap it and put it to the service of magical aims; it also involves sending this sound – and this is part of any definition of the mystical intention of prayer – on high. Here talismanic theory provides the means for the ascent of prayer. However this ascent will, in the end, serve magical purposes. It is by operating on high that the magic appears, not by putting the descending power in the service of a *magus*. This is thus a case of inverted talismanics; the magical act, which enhances the powers of the individual, does not – as in classical talismanics – operate primarily in the mundane but in the divine sphere. It is not the powerful individual but his powerful sounds that are transported into the divine zone.

The ascending power is, according to this passage, an amalgam of human sounds, vapors and the spiritual forces presiding over the specific sounds created during the prayer. Voice and speech are mentioned as distinct entities; the former stands, apparently, for undifferentiated sound, the latter for distinct and meaningful units. In fact it seems that the triad of *qol*, *dibbur* and *hevel*, reflects the classical triad of *qol*, *ruah* and *ve-dibbur* that occurs in the *Sefer Yetzirah*,<sup>19</sup> in which the vapor plays the role of spirit or wind.

However, the term *ruah*, for spirit, is also represented by the term *ruhaniyyut*, the spiritual force. Likewise, the organ of the mouth, which produces the three components of the amalgam, is also regarded as crucial for the creation of the proper effect. It is only the holy mouth, namely the mouth that does not express idle things, that can generate powerful sounds. This organ is not seen primarily as the generator of sound, though it is mentioned as such, but as a holy site onto which the celestial force descends. Its purity, more than loud pronunciation, ensures the descent of the forces. Within the context of the Kabbalistic mystico-magical conception of the mouth – starting, *in ovo*, already in the Bible –, we may assume that the human mouth was envisioned as corresponding to the divine mouth, whose utterances were understood as analogous to the process of emanation. In any case, we can deduce from the preceding remarks that the material aspects of prayer are more important to its success than is the intellectualistic consciousness that some Jewish philosophers insisted should accompany the act of prayer. Intense concentration of all the non-mental powers of the individual is required to ensure the efficacy of mystical prayer. Also involved in this process is the emotional attitude that accompanies the liturgical performance; it is through deep devotion, as well as other feelings of a religious nature, that the sounds of prayer are propelled on high.

A comparison between our mid-19th century text and the mid-18th century one by Rabbi Dov Baer of Miedzirech invites reflection on the nature of the history of ideas and mentalities. In the earlier text the more magical vision of language is attenuated, although its talismanic nature remains apparent. However, the later text – that of Safrin – returns to a more openly magical stand, which is closer to the magical talismanics of Cordovero and his sources. This return to Cordovero's view of prayer thus occurs in the writing of one of the most Lurianic thinkers in the entire Hasidic movement. It must therefore be questioned whether a linear explanation of the development of Hasidism, based solely upon the theory of the preponderance of the Lurianic thought, can do justice to such a varied and complex phenomenon.

There remains, in the above quote, a side-issue to be addressed: the comparison of the talismanic process, and its impact on high,

with the influence of the ancient prophets. The very link between prophecy and talismanics on the one hand, and the linguistic influence on the other, shows that a reinterpretation of magical prophecy was intended. The divine spirit that descends upon the prophet is to be understood talismanically. Prophecy is conceived now as an almost natural phenomenon that can be induced by means of religiously correct behavior.

### **Between Mentalism and Linguistics**

The emergence of talismanic linguistics is, indubitably, part of a much deeper restructuring of the Jewish religion, which has been going on in some circles since the Middle Ages. Its point is that not only language, or more precisely ritualistic language, has been invested with talismanic qualities: a broad range of religious objects, such as the Temple in Jerusalem, the special clothes of the high priest or even – more importantly– the human body have been understood in this way. These magical reinterpretations are the result of the encounter between Biblical and Rabbinic concepts of efficiency with certain magical views stemming from Hellenistic circles and transmitted through Arabic texts that were absorbed by some Medieval Jewish authors. Although the influence of Hellenistic concepts ought not to be underestimated, we must nevertheless ask a more basic question about the patterns of thought, already found in Judaism, which facilitated the absorption of this resonant Hellenistic magic. Indeed this “materialistic” turn, inherent in the adoption of talismanics, seems, *prima facie*, to go against the dominant tendency of Medieval speculative thought, which was preoccupied with mentalist reinterpretations of religion. Either in the form of Aristotelianism, which emphasized the ideal of intellection as the acme of the religious life, or in Neoplatonism, which was more concerned with “spiritual” processes, namely the cultivation of the life of the soul and its victory over the body, Medieval theologians stressed the importance of the spiritual over corporeal faculties. The struggle of the spirit against matter was the “real” war waged by many of the religious *perfecti* of the Middle Ages. The introduction of talismanics stands

apart from this tendency toward interiorization characteristic of Greek intellectualism and spiritualism.

Most Jewish theologians took part in this spiritual movement. Either as Aristotelian or as Neoplatonic thinkers, they contributed novel interpretations of canonic texts, following the lead of their Muslim predecessors who had inherited the Greek intellectualistic tendency. The negative attitude toward the body, sex, the imagination, and sometimes even toward the world, testify to the depth of this influence. However, this tendency does not easily coincide with the more positive attitude toward these issues in pre-Medieval Judaism. Because the mundane world, and even religious acts, were reinterpreted by some Medieval Jewish theologians metaphorically, allegorically or symbolically, this other-worldly hermeneutics undercut the profoundly non-metaphorical message of the Biblical and Rabbinic texts. Unlike the markedly metaphorical interpretations of religious texts characteristic of Philo and of early Christianity and Gnosticism, Rabbinic Judaism was more inclined to take the texts, the rituals and the world at face value. A ritualistic religion such as Rabbinic Judaism consists in a sanctification of concrete acts, objects and sometimes even persons. From this point of view, the ritualistic tendencies in certain Hermetic and Neoplatonic writings, which emphasized the occult powers inherent in concrete entities (unlike other, different trends in Hermeticism and Neoplatonism, which sacralized subtle types of *religio mentis*), could be reconciled with certain Rabbinic positions that were being challenged by Medieval Jewish theologians under the influence of Greek intellectualistic trends. To a certain extent two forms of Greek speculation competed in some Medieval Jewish writings, providing different answers to the spiritual concerns of European Jews.

The talismanic solution was relevant to the state of exile of the Jews, that is to say in the context of the destruction of the Temple and the loss of the land of Israel, both of which were considered to have special occult qualities. In some circles these lost qualities were thought to be counterbalanced by an emphasis upon the talismanic value of other ritualistic entities: the liturgical texts, the Torah, and the Hebrew language itself were considered to have magical qualities. These qualities had been denied, explicitly or implicitly, by the exponents of mental religiosity, best represented



in the works of Maimonides. The “great eagle” waged a fierce and systematic war against talismanics in general, as well as against the magic related to the divine names. The special role which even Maimonides acknowledged for the Hebrew language was attributed by him not to its supposedly extraordinary qualities – as was claimed by most Jewish mystics in general and by the talismanic thinkers in particular – but to the absence of terms for naming the sexual organs. A survey of the development of Jewish thought between the 12th and the 19th centuries reveals an ongoing oscillation between, on the one hand, the talismanic approach that was started in Judaism by ibn Ezra and his interpreters and was continued by some Kabbalists into the 15th and 16th centuries before being taken up by the early Hasidic masters; and, on the other hand, the more cerebral attitude of the Aristotelian and Neoplatonic thinkers. The theory of magic, examined here as it relates to talismanic linguistics, served therefore as a speculative world-view that strengthened the tendency in some Rabbinic circles to sanctify material and active rituals in order to balance the mentalistic attitude. This balance was achieved by the emergence of systems that treated the talismanic either as a higher realm than the mental or by the addition of the talismanic to the mental. Let me quote here a fascinating example of this move away from mentalism to talismanics. In one of his observations Alemanno writes the following:

Just as the separate intellects perform wondrous acts in creatures by means of the movements of the stars, so does the Agent Intellect perform wondrous and powerful miracles in the hyle, by means of the movements of the [five] places [of articulation] that are in the soul of man, [created] in order to pronounce the letters. And these are the miracles realized by means of utterances emerging from the mouth of persons who do not even know nor understand the meaning of what they are uttering.<sup>20</sup>

That the Agent Intellect influences various processes in the lower world, epistemological or physical, is well-known to medieval Aristotelianism. However, what is new here is the concept that human utterances can influence these processes. Man, like the spheres, is conceived as activating the hyle. The effect of the utterance does not depend upon the extent of a person’s understanding, which is a fact that is fascinating and bizarre if the person is conceived to be, so to speak, the organ of the Agent Intellect. Equally, unlike the later Safedian Kabbalists and the Hasidic masters, Alemanno is not concerned

with the emotional aspect of talismanic activity. This indeed is a striking irony; according to Maimonides, the Agent Intellect is the source of all knowledge; according to Alemanno, it is the source of linguistic, unlearned magic, which is identified in this context with linguistic talismans. Indeed, in the lines occurring immediately after this remark, Alemanno mentions that speech is one of those acts that "receive the influx". Alemanno's metaphysical concept of the Agent Intellect was dramatically affected by another vision of language, quite different from the views expressed by Maimonides, though stemming from the most ardent Maimonidean among the Kabbalists: Abraham Abulafia. In fact, the development of the magical theory of language could be summarized as follows: the main line in Jewish thought assumes that the Hebrew language is powerful; Maimonides's attempt to combat this view was not accepted by the Kabbalists, including even those among them who deeply admired the great eagle. Indeed it is precisely in Abulafia's writings, and those of his disciples, that an elaborate metaphysics of language was built, which remained influential in Jewish thought for centuries.

Thus we can trace in Jewish Medieval literature a confrontation between types of religiosity that had already encountered each other in the Hellenistic period, when theurgists compared their art to the works of the philosophers and asserted that their practice represented a higher form of religion. Yohanan Alemanno explicitly expresses this idea in an imaginary dialogue between a philosopher and what may be called a talismanic thinker:

If you – namely the philosopher – say to me: what is this dream you entertain about the preparations hidden from the eyes of the philosophers, who neither know nor understand what these [preparations] mean to you? For they say: let us come to wisdom and [intellectual] union only by way of intellectual speculation or by sudden intuition, not by magical actions and buildings, vessels and prayers, vain things and many dreams. All these are things unfounded in the eyes of the philosophers, who are men of intellect and reason. All the things we say are the words of the ancients who knew the nature of existing beings, the relations between them, the way in which they were linked with one another and how to prepare a receptacle for the reception of the influence of superior bodies.<sup>21</sup>

One additional point needs to be clarified: in many of the above discussions the Hebrew letters, presented either as written characters or as pronounced sounds, are conceived as power-laden entities without, however, directly addressing the question of the

letters of the divine name or names. Though all the Kabbalists conceived of the Tetragrammaton as the most efficient of the powerful linguistic entities, their view of language as powerful did not always depend upon the peculiar features of the letters of the divine names. On the basis of Abraham Abulafia's and Alemanno's discussions it is possible to assume that language, as formed of primary linguistic entities, can in itself function magically. Alemanno's texts, however, should not be thought of as unique; the preference for oral performance over the mental realm is clear-cut in many texts of 18th century Hasidism. Moreover, we should also be aware that even in the 20th century, Jewish thinkers like Franz Rosenzweig have retreated from the idealistic vision of language in order to embrace a more speech-oriented type of thought.

## Notes

1. See Gershom Scholem, "Le nom de Dieu (II)," *Diogenè*, no. 80, 1972 pp. 168–196.
2. Ms., Munich 214, fol. 51a.
3. Frances Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, Chicago, 1964, pp. 49–57, 70–72, 80–82, and Eugenio Garin, *La cultura filosofica del Rinascimento Italiano*, Florence, 1961, pp. 159–165.
4. Exode 31: 2–3.
5. 'Asarah Ma'amarot, II, fol. 41b.
6. Quoted by Rabbi Baruch de Kossov in his 'Amud ha-'Avodah, Chernovitz, 1863, fol. 113c.
7. Rabbi Aharon de Zhitomir, *Toledot Aharon*, I. fol. 5c.
8. *Sefer 'Einei ha-'Edah*, Commentary of Alemanno on the book of *Genesis*, Ms., Jerusalem, JNUL 8th 598, fol. 52b.
9. Ms., Oxford, Bodleiana 2234, fol. 95b.
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Collectanea*, Oxford 2234, fol. 17a.
12. *Ibid.*, fol. 3b.
13. *Sha'ar ha-Hesheq*, Halberstadt, 1860, fol. 38b.
14. *Traité sans titre*, Ms. Paris, BN 849, fol. 77a.
15. *Anonymous Kabbalistic Responsum*, Ms., New York, JTS 255, fol. 59b.
16. 'Or Yaqaar, Jerusalem, 1983, vol. XII, p. 147.
17. Rabbi Ya'aqov Yosef de Polonoy, *Ben Porat Yosef*, Pietrkov, 1884, fol. 21a.
18. *Sefer Notzer Hesed*, Jerusalem, 1982, pp. 110–111.
19. I, 9.
20. *Collectanea*, Oxford 2234, fol. 3a.
21. *Sha'ar ha-Hesheq*, fol. 34b.