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## A Novel Look at Moshe Idel's East-West Problem

DAVID N. MYERS

UCLA

MOSHE IDEL. *Old Worlds, New Mirrors: On Jewish Mysticism and Twentieth-Century Thought*. Jewish Culture and Contexts. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009. Pp. 336.

FOR MANY OF US in the field of Jewish studies, but not in the field of Kabbalah studies, our first encounter with Moshe Idel came in 1988 with the publication of his major work in English, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*. Although he had been working in the field for more than a decade, from the time of his 1976 dissertation at the Hebrew University on Avraham Abulafia, it was *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* that brought Idel to wide public attention, announcing his own substantial methodological and substantive disagreements with the towering figure of modern Kabbalah studies, Gershom Scholem.

Since then, Idel has gone on to attain a position of international distinction, publishing at a staggering rate in Kabbalah studies, and many fields beyond. In the process, he—like Scholem before and Wolfson and others after him—has used the study of Kabbalah as a gateway of inquiry into important methodological, theoretical, hermeneutical, philosophical, and historical questions.

This leads us to the book at hand, *Old Worlds, New Mirrors: On Jewish Mysticism and Twentieth-Century Thought*, which is indeed an inquiry into important methodological, theoretical, philosophical, and historical questions. It reflects Idel's brilliant, capacious, probing, and wildly imaginative mind, as it ranges over terrain somewhat less familiar to him and his usual readers, but of critical significance to his overarching intellectual and cultural *Weltanschauung*.

What I propose to do in these remarks is to undertake three tasks: first, to sketch out briefly the structure of the book and point to a major argumentative strand in it; second, to identify two central motifs that surface in the book—and that make for a surprising, counterintuitive,

and even troubling read; and finally, to adopt a literary conceit to read the book against the analytic and stylistic grain, as a way of getting at some of the intriguing psychodynamics involved in it.

## I

*Old Worlds, New Mirrors* is a collection of previously published essays on modern Jewish thought divided into four parts. The first section deals with a number of renowned Central European scholars and intellectuals who belong to what Idel calls in the introduction to the book “a new Jewish elite” (p. 6). The second section contains three of Idel’s papers on one of the chief figures of that new elite, his own long-standing master, foil, and nemesis: Gershom Scholem. The third section offers up a wide-ranging assembly of pieces that deal with the place that Kabbalah played in the thought of a number of other members of the new cultural elite including Kafka, Rosenzweig, Benjamin, and Celan. The fourth and final section of the book deals with modern scholarly views of Hasidism, which since the late eighteenth century has been the most important site of ongoing kabbalistic activity and practice.

Although disparate in focus and length, the four sections and thirteen chapters do betray a consistent theme. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to state that they present a consistent set of oppositions that add up to a theme and in fact, spell out a decided cultural stance on the author’s part. Among the recurring oppositions in the book are:

- i) Eastern European vs. Central European Jewish cultures
- ii) tradition vs. innovation
- iii) continuity vs. rupture
- iv) rootedness vs. cosmopolitanism
- v) homeland vs. *galut* (exile)
- vi) Jerusalem vs. Athens (or perhaps in its more modern incarnation, Hebrew vs. German)

These oppositions, all of which circulate throughout the book, lend considerable weight to Idel’s critique of “the new Jewish elite”—the largely Central European Jewish intellectuals whose most famous constellation arose in Weimar-era Berlin but which continued to exert itself up to the present through figures like the French literary critic Jacques Derrida and the arch cosmopolitan Jewish elitist (and diasporist, to boot) George Steiner.

In casting his gaze on these figures, Idel positions himself as their cultural opposite, recalling his own origins in a small shtetl in northern

Romania that was “largely untouched by the intellectual life and spiritual challenges of the dynamic Central European Jewish elite” (p. 10). Idel asserts that his outlook is not to be seen as “a critique of the Central European approaches to Judaism” (p. 12), but it is hard to read his approach as anything but. It hinges on a barely veiled but stark dichotomy between Eastern and Central European Jewish cultures that he declares he would like to overcome. Thus, the Central European figures whom he discusses were “saturnine desolates,” beset by a melancholy characteristic of their age of *Kulturpessimismus*. They were assimilated, relatively unfamiliar with Hebrew and core Jewish concepts, and in conversation with the majority non-Jewish culture more than with other Jews (pp. 7–8). By contrast, the culture of the Romanian shtetl was grounded in a more immediate, rooted, and affirmative Jewish experience. It was altogether devoid of “the abstractions, universal missions, negativities, and religious paradoxes elaborated by a minuscule Central European Jewish intelligentsia” (p. 11).

There is, between the lines of this dichotomous presentation, the specter of a Romanian cultural patriot. Idel’s relatively recent rediscovery of, and frequent visits to, his native Romania, where he has become a celebrated cultural figure, goes hand in hand with the stance he adopts in *Old Worlds, New Mirrors*. So too his avid scholarly interest in Moses Gaster, Solomon Schechter, and, for that matter, the Romanian traces of the Ba’al Shem Tov hints at this self-positioning. It is perfectly legitimate—and moreover, an illuminating and creative project of scholarly excavation. But it can lead to a sort of cultural Manichaeism that is not always attentive to the multivalent and dialectical nature of the concepts and figures that stand at the heart of his inquiry.

## II

I would like to expand on this point by focusing on two central terms in the book. First, Idel takes frequent aim at “symbolism,” which he understands as the persistent attempt by Scholem and those who followed in his wake to make sense of kabbalistic language in symbolic terms. “All mystics,” Scholem wrote in 1972, “share a common basis, namely the fact that language is used to communicate something which goes way beyond the sphere which allows for expression and formation.”<sup>1</sup>

What does Idel find objectionable in this approach? In the first instance, and closely related to his recurrent concern over cultural

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1. Scholem, “The Name of God,” *Diogenes* 80 (1972): 60, quoted in Idel, *Old Worlds, New Mirrors*, 228–29.

authenticity, it is not sufficiently Jewish in origin. He argues that Scholem derived his interest in symbolism not from Jewish sources but rather from the early sixteenth-century German Christian kabbalist Johannes Reuchlin, among others. As a result, an unarticulated taint of inauthenticity persists in Scholem's work. This becomes clear when Idel compares Scholem to Abraham Joshua Heschel in chapter 12 ("Abraham Heschel on Mysticism and Hasidism"). Idel invests a great deal of intellectual capital in Heschel, for he is the "single representative of the Eastern European perspective" in the book (p. 217). Of particular interest to him was Heschel's attitude toward symbolism. In contrast to the German-born Scholem, the Eastern European Heschel eschewed symbolism as a mode of interpreting mysticism and "returned to a more Hasidic approach that reduced its [symbolism's] role in religion" (p. 229). This meant, as Heschel himself declared, that "what we need is *immediacy* . . . This will not be found through introducing a set of symbols."<sup>2</sup>

Heschel's attitude encourages Idel to place a heavy cultural overlay on symbolism. As a form of mediation, even a barrier, to direct, immediate experience, symbolism is seen by Idel as the byproduct of the more detached, intellectualized approach to Judaism typical of the Central European cultural elite, whose living incarnation was Gershom Scholem. But this claim ignores the fact that it was precisely members of the new Jewish elite who were caught in the throes of "dissimilation" and were desperate in the 1920s to take a "leap into existence," as they set about to reshape the old neo-Kantian priorities into a new philosophy of Experience. It also ignores the fact that it was precisely the vitalizing power of Kabbalah that drew in and compelled Gershom Scholem as a young man, more or less simultaneous with and causally linked to his discovery of the animating power of Zionism.

Setting aside these complications to the prosopographic picture Idel draws, it seems reasonable to ask whether one must sacrifice symbolism to an overdrawn opposition to immediacy. The role of symbolism, of course, is a crucial question in the scholarship on Kabbalah, and I can lay no claim to expertise in the relevant primary or even secondary sources dealing with it.<sup>3</sup> And yet, from the perspective of an interested outsider, the question arises: Does symbolism have no role in helping us to understand Kabbalah? Were symbols not essential to overcoming the

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2. Heschel, "Symbolism and Jewish Faith," in *Religious Symbolism*, ed. F. E. Johnson (New York, 1955), 99, quoted in Idel, *Old Worlds, New Mirrors*, 224.

3. The locus classicus for such discussions remains Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, trans. R. Manheim (New York, 1965).

inherent limits of human language and mind in the quest for a mystical experience? How else can we make sense of a concept like *shevirat ha-kelim* (the breaking of the vessels) that anchors the Lurianic view of theodicy if not through symbolism?

According to Scholem, symbolism was that which served as the most developed linguistic means of expressing “a certain inexpressible something.” Idel himself formulates the key question when he discusses Scholem’s treatment of the Lurianic notion of *tsimtsum* (the Divine withdrawal) in chapter 4 (“The Function of Symbols in Gershom Scholem”): “Is the withdrawal a real event, which means the removal of the divine substance from a certain space, or should this term be understood, as some kabbalists have done, metaphorically?” (p. 99). He doesn’t answer this question conclusively nor does he rule out the possibility of a symbolic reading of the term—a rather surprising turn given his general antisymbolist proclivity.

And yet, Idel believes that Scholem’s method of reading kabbalistic symbols is flawed because of a particular epistemological/methodological proclivity. It is not only that symbols pose an obstacle to the immediacy of experience. It is that Scholem’s chosen method of interpreting symbolism was historicist, which is the second key term I want to discuss here. History became, for Scholem, “the first cause of the production of the symbol by the kabbalist and ultimate goal of the scholarly enterprise.” To illustrate the point, Idel recalls that, in Scholem’s analysis, *tsimtsum* was forged by the harsh experience of the Spanish Expulsion to stand for “an exile of cosmic dimensions” (p. 96).

Idel’s ascription of a historical understanding of symbols to Scholem is hardly a misreading. Scholem did insist that history “serves as a productive decoding of the secret writing of the past, of the great symbols of our life.”<sup>4</sup> But Idel’s claim is more far-reaching than that. Scholem, in his view, heads his own “historical criticism school” (p. 108). This line of argument is a continuation of the claims in *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, in which Idel juxtaposed Scholem’s historical method in interpreting Kabbalah to his own phenomenological approach; the latter was focused more on the immanently Jewish development of Kabbalah than on the contextual ruptures and disjunctures that historicism invariably seeks out. Scholem’s historicist reading of symbols in Kabbalah fits neatly into this pattern. It was more attuned to epochal historical changes than to structural and ideational continuities in Judaism, and in two ways. Not only did Scho-

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4. *On the Possibility of Jewish Mysticism in Our Time* (Philadelphia, 1997), 67, quoted in Idel, *Old Worlds, New Mirrors*, 100.

lem insist that events like the Spanish Expulsion fundamentally altered key pillars of the kabbalistic vision. He himself was propelled to a more historical reading of symbols after the Holocaust, the staggering enormity of which made clear to him the limits of linguistic representation for that which defies expression. In reconstructing this profile, Idel ties together Scholem's symbolist and historicist tendencies, both of which bear the traces of the Central European Jewish cultural universe of which he writes in such broad strokes. Furthermore, Idel seems to be suggesting, *entre les lignes*, that both tendencies were obstacles to—perhaps even defenses against—a more primal, unmediated, experiential approach to Judaism that typified the Eastern European Jew.

### III

The fact that Idel uses an unmistakably historical mode in honing his critique of Scholem is a point to which I will return presently. Rather than retrace the steps of that contextualizing move now, however, I propose to read *Old Worlds, New Mirrors* not as a collection of scholarly articles but rather as a novel, a gripping piece of fiction with a readily discernible plot line. I must confess that the inspiration for this conceit is not mine. Rather, it owes to a wonderfully inventive review by Robert Paul Wolff of the best-selling book from 1987, *The Closing of the American Mind* by University of Chicago professor Allan Bloom. Wolff read Bloom's book, an attack on the multicultural turn in American higher education, as a novel written by Saul Bellow whose main character was named Allan Bloom (this in advance of Bellow's actual novel from 2000, *Ravelstein*, which was indeed based on Bloom).<sup>5</sup>

Reading *Old Worlds, New Mirrors* in similar fashion may allow us to probe deeper into the central characters of the book and get closer to the heart of the matter. In that spirit, I propose to regard this book as a kabbalistically themed *roman à clef* that pits two major figures in modern Jewish scholarship against one other: a young upstart named Moshe Idel, and the grand demonic (in both positive and negative sense of the word) master, Gershom Scholem. The younger scholar, Idel, engages in a life-

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5. I must confess further that I have used this literary strategy once before myself, in a review of Yoram Hazony's *The Jewish State*, a very different book from Idel's in many ways, but which nonetheless bears one key similarity to *Old Worlds, New Mirrors*: a fixation on German-Jewish intellectuals—and an accompanying intimation, much stronger in Hazony's case, that they are somehow less capable of true, primal, authentic Jewish (or Zionist) sentiments. See "Hazono shel Hazony, or Even If You Will It, It Can Still Be a Dream," *Israel Studies* 6 (Summer 2001): 107–17.

long struggle to escape the shadow of Scholem but sees his influence at every turn, not only in Kabbalah research but in virtually every corner of Jewish intellectual life. Idel struggles not only to liberate himself from the anxiety of influence of the older figure but to frame a coherent cultural critique that, at times, seems to amount to a concerted ideological project. The goal of the project is to release the hold of a rationalist, assimilated, derivative German Jewish—perhaps we may even say Babylonian—culture, wedded to its veneration of exile, that has held sway in intellectual circles for decades in favor of a far more grounded, immanent, experiential, and ultimately authentic Eastern European (and by extension, Palestinian) Judaism.

The scholarly and cultural struggle portrayed in this novel ends inconclusively, for the young Idel's project is actually an impossible one. Indeed, the project cannot account for the fact that the leader of the elitist German camp, Gershom Scholem, is a Zionist who, as a young man, rejects his contemporaries' veneration of exile and immigrates to Palestine, believing that the Jewish return to Erets Yisra'el is a return to history itself.

The project also fails (though the novel succeeds) by revealing that, against his better judgment, the fictive Moshe Idel is not the opposite of the Central European cosmopolites against whom he takes aim but is in fact fully at home in their world, availing himself of cultural norms and scholarly methods native to *Mitteleuropa*. Of no greater importance in this regard is historicism, for which the young Idel, in his search for holistic and authentic values, develops a strong distaste. He fears the atomizing effect of historicism, as well as its ability to mediate, dissect, and explain away immediate experience. But, over the course of the novel, it becomes clear that Idel himself can never fully escape its clutches. His critical perspective on Scholem is inescapably informed by historicism, beginning with his recognition of the influence of Reuchlin (and Molitor) and culminating with his recognition of Scholem's turn to symbolist interpretations after the Holocaust. Moreover, historicism provides the methodological backdrop to Idel's engagement with and criticism of many other members of the cultural elite whom he encounters in the book, from Kafka to Celan to Derrida.

At the end of the day, the younger scholar is able to forge bold new pathways of research into Kabbalah. But he is not able to upend the cultural or methodological roots of his feared rival. Indeed, the two giants of Kabbalah scholarship, Scholem and Idel, are—to borrow Yuri Slezkine's well-known terms—both Apollonian and Mercurian, rooted and



cosmopolitan, historicists and antihistoricists, not one to the exclusion of the other. In this sense, the epitaph for the novel might well be, in a final ironic twist, what Scholem himself wrote in 1944, a searing indictment of the earlier *Wissenschaft des Judentums*—and of his own generation: “We came to rebel, and ended up continuing.”<sup>6</sup>

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6. Scholem, “Mi-tokh hirhurim ‘al Hōkhmat Yisra’el,” in *Hōkhmat Yisra’el: Hebetim historiyim u-filosofiyim*, ed. P. Mendes-Flohr (Jerusalem, 1979), 167.