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# The Speech of Being, the Voice of God: Phonetic Mysticism in the Kabbalah of Asher ben David and His Contemporaries

EITAN P. FISHBANE

These words only came into the world after difficult birth-pangs . . .  
They flashed suddenly like lightning, and with a single flight they illuminated an entire world.

Haim Nahman Bialik<sup>1</sup>

## THE PLACE OF R. ASHER IN THE EARLY KABBALAH

THE LITERARY EMERGENCE of Provençal Kabbalah was bound up in the transformation from extreme esotericism, with an emphasis on orality in the transmission of theological secrets, to a more exoteric and systematic written exposition of kabbalistic symbology.<sup>2</sup> Integral to this transi-

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1. Bialik, "Gilui ve-kisui ba-lashon," in *The Collected Writings of H. N. Bialik* (Tel Aviv, 1938), 207.

2. See Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven, Conn., 1988), 250–56; idem, "Transmission in Thirteenth-Century Kabbalah," in *Transmitting Jewish Traditions: Orality, Textuality, and Cultural Diffusion*, ed. Y. Elman and I. Gershoni (New Haven, Conn., 2000), 138–65; *Absorbing Perfections: Kabbalah and Interpretation* (New Haven, Conn., 2002), 390–409. Haviva Pedaya has also noted the centrality of this transition. See H. Pedaya, "Flaw and Correction in the Concept of the Godhead in the Teachings of Rabbi Isaac the Blind" (Hebrew), *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 6 (1987): 159; idem, *Name and Sanctuary in the Teaching of R. Isaac the Blind: A Comparative Study in the Writings of the Earliest Kabbalists* (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 2001), 59–69. Also see the work of Elliot R. Wolfson, particularly "Beyond the Spoken Word: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Medieval Jewish Mysticism," in Elman and Gershoni, eds., *Transmitting Jewish Traditions*, 166–224. Of special note as well is the extensive analysis in Moshe Halbertal, *Concealment and Revelation: Secrecy and Its Boundaries in Medieval Jewish Tradition*, trans. J. Feldman ([Hebrew: Jerusalem, 2001] Princeton, N.J., 2007).

tion was R. Asher ben David, grandson of the Rabad of Posquières<sup>3</sup> and nephew of R. Isaac the Blind, the first Provençal kabbalist who sought to explain and clarify the theosophical doctrine of the *sefirot* in an unhindered and uncryptic manner.<sup>4</sup> While his uncle and master R. Isaac was opposed to public discussion and exposition of the mystical doctrines, R. Asher devoted himself fully to the exotericization of kabbalistic teachings through the composition of his magnum opus, *Sefer ha-yihud*. This book constitutes a major break in the literary history of the early Kabbalah, serving as a virtual primer of sefirotic symbolism blended with more traditional modes of ethical teaching and discourse.<sup>5</sup> The project of writing *Sefer ha-yihud* opened the hermetically concealed symbolism of prior generations of kabbalists and inaugurated an entirely new form of kabbalistic discourse in southwestern France. When compared to other early Provençal sources, such as R. Isaac the Blind's *Commentary to Sefer yetzirah*, R. Asher's work appears to be a model of clarity and systematic thought. While R. Isaac's *Commentary* is extremely dense, laconic, and obscure, *Sefer ha-yihud* provides complete definitions of the emerging kabbalistic symbols.

This transformation from secrecy to public exposition seems to have been stimulated by external forces as well. We know from the sources collected by Gershom Scholem that students of R. Isaac the Blind in the Spanish towns of Gerona and Burgos had already been far freer in their exposition of kabbalistic rhetoric and had consequently caused much confusion among uninitiated audiences in those locales. It was apparently the

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3. On the earlier history of the Rabad family, see Isadore Twersky, *Rabad of Posquières: A Twelfth Century Talmudist*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia, 1980).

4. Given the pivotal position of R. Asher in the early history of Kabbalah, it is surprising that until recently no modern scholar has devoted a single focused study to R. Asher, with the exception of Daniel Abrams, who has prepared an edition of R. Asher's collected kabbalistic works based on examination of the relevant manuscripts. For the central edition of *Sefer ha-yihud*, Abrams chose MS Moscow 321, and he has also provided the variant manuscript traditions. See Daniel Abrams, *R. Asher ben David: His Complete Works and Studies in his Kabbalistic Thought* (Los Angeles, 1996). Abrams himself notes that R. Asher's *Sefer ha-yihud* functions as an exoteric work amid the esoteric trends of his teachers and colleagues (pp. 23–25).

5. On this question, see Joseph Dan, "The Ideational and Social Background to the Development of the Traditional Mussar Literature in the Thirteenth Century," in *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 7 (1988). Cf. idem, *Jewish Mysticism and Jewish Ethics* (Northvale, N.J., 1996), 17–48. In Dan's view, R. Asher was less a radical mystic and more of a traditional ethicist. For a more detailed and documented presentation of this discussion, see idem, *Sifrut ha-derush ve-ha-musar* (Jerusalem, 1975).

exposition by these disciples of R. Isaac's teaching that engendered R. Meir b. Simon of Narbonne's vehement response preserved in the exchange of letters published by Scholem.<sup>6</sup> It is evident from the sources that R. Isaac was greatly displeased with the degree of exotericization practiced by his students in Gerona, and he seems to have first asked R. Asher ben David to serve as his diplomatic envoy to the Spanish kabbalists. The Geronese scholars had requested that R. Isaac himself make the journey, in order to clarify ambiguous matters of doctrine and heal the ideological rifts, but this proved to be impossible. Instead, R. Isaac appears to have selected R. Asher as his spokesman in Spain. As R. Isaac wrote to Gerona:

I cannot perceive any decree of heaven according to which I would now have to leave my place of residence and come to you. But when R. Asher, the son of my esteemed brother, the learned R. David, may his memory be blessed, comes to you, follow every counsel that he gives you, for I will let you know my will through him. He also knows my position and he saw throughout my life how I conducted myself with regard to my companions.<sup>7</sup>

This passage from R. Isaac's letter to Gerona reveals the extent to which R. Asher enjoyed a privileged and prominent place in the kabbalistic school of his uncle and master. R. Isaac testifies here that R. Asher was an intimate witness to the inner workings of R. Isaac's circle of mystics, and that he was privy to discussions and events that were presumably not shared with the mystics outside of the family of the Rabad of Posquières. The implication of the passage quoted above is that R. Asher grew up in the shadow of R. Isaac's dominant model, witnessed the concrete praxis of his uncle's theoretical kabbalistic system, and therefore is a credible spokesman for R. Isaac's mystical perspective. R. Asher may legitimately represent R. Isaac's abstract thought to the Spanish kabbalists precisely because he has seen the pragmatic implementation of R. Isaac's ideas in the life-model of his teacher. In light of the fact that R. Asher saw how

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6. Gershom Scholem, "Te'udah ḥadashah le-toldot re'shit ha-kabalah," in *Sefer Bialik* (Tel Aviv, 1933). This important study has been reprinted in G. Scholem's *Mehkare kabalah*, ed. Y. Ben-Shlomo and M. Idel (Tel Aviv, 1998), 7–38. The documents have also been translated and published in Scholem's *Origins of the Kabbalah*, trans. A. Arkush (Princeton, N.J., 1987), 393–402. Cf. the consideration in Isaiah Tishby, *Studies in Kabbalah and Its Branches: Researches and Sources* (Jerusalem, 1982), 1:8.

7. See Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 395.

R. Isaac “conducted himself with regard to [his] companions,” R. Asher is qualified to speak on his behalf. The exchange of letters collected by Scholem, and particularly the fragment I have cited by R. Isaac, is an important documentary foundation for future work on the biography of R. Asher ben David and his central place in the history of the Rabad family in southern France. From R. Isaac’s letter we may reasonably surmise that R. Asher was not only a member of R. Isaac’s inner circle but was formed—at least in part—by R. Isaac during his childhood and the early years of his intellectual maturation. A proper and thorough examination of R. Asher’s life in the context of nascent Kabbalah is a longer work that remains to be done.

The role of R. Asher as emissary was clearly to speak on behalf of R. Isaac. His purpose would be to make the esoteric symbology espoused by R. Isaac (and apparently misunderstood by some of the disciples in Spain) more explicit and clear, emphasizing the underlying unity of the cosmic sefirotic structure. Mark Sendor has suggested that the charges of Meir b. Simon, along with the implications of R. Isaac’s letter to Gerona and the introductory pages of R. Asher’s *Sefer ha-yihud*, point toward possible accusations of heresy made against the kabbalists, and that the mission of R. Asher on behalf of R. Isaac was to stress the indivisibility of the divine being.<sup>8</sup> *Sefer ha-yihud* is permeated with the rhetoric of absolute cosmic unity (as the title itself suggests)—a theme which ultimately becomes the central feature of classical Spanish Kabbalah. The motivations behind the composition of R. Asher’s book therefore seem to be twofold. The first issue concerns a desire on the part of some Provençal kabbalists to move from a highly esoteric symbolic discourse to a more exoteric one. This motivation would go in hand with the desire to give Kabbalah a prominent literary voice in the Jewish intellectual milieu of southwestern France and northern Spain. The second issue concerns an effort to clarify doctrinal misunderstandings, which might only be rectified through a systematic written document, in order to avert the dangers of polytheistic heresy and Jewish communal instability. As such, *Sefer ha-yihud* may indeed be construed as an apologetic defense of Kabbalah, and the book was very plausibly written for the Geronese kabbalists at the time of R. Asher’s visit.<sup>9</sup>

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8. M. B. Sendor, “The Emergence of Provençal Kabbalah: Rabbi Isaac the Blind’s Commentary to *Sefer Yezirah*,” 2 vols. (Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1994), 1:171–74.

9. According to Sendor: “Given the parallel phrasings in R. Asher’s introduction and R. Isaac’s letter, it seems reasonable to conclude that *Sefer ha-yihud* was written for the Gerona kabbalists, on the very occasion of his visit, or as a me-

*Sefer ha-yihud* is divided into several distinct sections and units. The bulk of the text is concerned with the ontological status of the divine attributes (*mīdot*). In a long excursus R. Asher sets out to reveal the correspondences between the *mīdot* and the sefirotic symbols. As Sendor has remarked, R. Asher strives “to explain how the *sefirot* as *mīdot*, ‘finite and definite dimensions’ or attributes can be predicates of one God. According to R. Asher, the finite multiplicity implied in sefirotic designations refers to the way creatures perceive his actions, not to God himself.”<sup>10</sup> R. Asher’s underlying goal in this discussion is to demonstrate the complete unity of the divine being and the lack of anything essentially finite within the divine sphere.<sup>11</sup> This excursus is also the occasion for R. Asher’s lengthy discussion of ethics in *Sefer ha-yihud*, a topic central to his entire literary project.<sup>12</sup>

My primary concern in this essay, however, will be with a shorter section of R. Asher’s book that most fully, in my opinion, reveals the power of his mystical and theological imagination. This section has been labeled his *Commentary to the Divine Name*. I will use this richly symbolic and allusive text as a window onto the emergence of a new form of Jewish theological discourse and literature in Provence, side by side with the growing discursive trends among the Geronese kabbalists. In this *Commentary*, R. Asher sets aside the ethical rhetoric of earlier parts of *Sefer ha-yihud* and devotes himself to an extended rumination on the mysteries of creation and revelation. It is precisely in his exposition of the sefirotic symbolism encoded in the letters of the Tetragrammaton that R. Asher reveals the secret theosophy of his predecessors and fashions an

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mento.” Sendor, “The Emergence of Provençal Kabbalah,” 1:148. A different position is offered by D. Abrams (*R. Asher ben David*, 25). Abrams notes that R. Asher never mentions any intention to travel to Spain, and he argues that R. Asher was probably writing for a Provençal kabbalistic audience, not a Spanish one (23–25). Moshe Idel has also argued that R. Asher was not sent to Spain by R. Isaac. See Idel, “Naḥmanides: Kabbalah, *Halakha* and Spiritual Leadership” (Hebrew), *Tarbitz* 64 (1995): 543–47.

10. See Sendor, “The Emergence of Provençal Kabbalah,” 1:303.

11. In this regard, see Ephraim Gottlieb, *Studies in the Kabbalah Literature*, ed. J. Hacker (Hebrew; Tel Aviv, 1976), 293–308. Gottlieb correctly noted that the development of the sefirotic system in Kabbalah should be viewed in the larger context of medieval philosophical discussions of divine attributes.

12. With respect to the section of *Sefer ha-yihud* that has been labeled *Perush yod-gimel mīdot*, and its relationship to Jewish ethical discourse, see Joseph Dan, *Jewish Mysticism and Jewish Ethics*, 31–43. Dan curiously claims that R. Asher’s kabbalistic treatises “do not include profound discussions of kabbalistic problems,” p. 38.

exoteric presentation of cosmic reality. In studying the tropes evident in this text, I will attempt to unpack an early kabbalistic conception of divine reality, of the structures and dynamics of Being, as well as perceptions of prophetic experience in relation to that ontology.

PHONETIC MYSTICISM AND THE COSMIC ALEF

Haviva Pedaya has justly noted that commentaries to the divine Name came to constitute a literary genre of their own in the textual world of early Kabbalah.<sup>13</sup> Along with commentaries to the liturgy and mystical speculations on the Work of Creation,<sup>14</sup> this was a central form of expression for kabbalists of the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. R. Isaac the Blind placed the symbolism of the divine Name at the heart of his theological system, conceiving of the letters of the Tetragrammaton as the essential fabric of the cosmos, representing the different stages in divine self-revelation.<sup>15</sup> This focus on linguistic mysticism by R. Isaac

13. H. Pedaya, "Flaw and Correction in the Concept of the Godhead in the Teachings of Rabbi Isaac the Blind," 157; idem, *Name and Sanctuary*, 69–72. For a discussion of the centrality of divine Name mysticism among the *Haside Ashkenaz*, see Joseph Dan, *The Esoteric Theology of Ashkenazi Hasidism* (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 1968), 74–76.

14. Modern scholarship has paid a great deal of attention to these devotionally oriented reflections, often seeing these commentaries as windows onto the techniques and modes of mystical experience among the early kabbalists. See, for example, Gershom Scholem, "The Concept of Kavvanah in the Early Kabbalah," in *Studies in Jewish Thought: An Anthology of German Jewish Scholarship*, ed. A. Jospe (Detroit, 1981), 162–80; Moshe Idel, "'Al kavanat Shemoneh 'esre etsel R. Yitsḥak Sagi Nahor," in *Masu'ot: Studies in Kabbalistic Literature and Jewish Thought Dedicated to the Memory of Prof. Ephraim Gottlieb*, ed. M. Oron and A. Goldreich (Hebrew; Jerusalem: 1994), 25–52; Seth Brody, "Human Hands Dwell in Heavenly Heights: Worship and Mystical Experience in Thirteenth-Century Kabbalah" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1991); E. R. Wolfson, "Sacred Space and Mental Iconography: *Imago Templi* and Contemplation in Rhineland Jewish Pietism," in *Ki Baruch Hu: Ancient Near Eastern, Biblical, and Judaic Studies in Honor of Baruch A. Levine*, ed. R. Chazan, W. Hallo, and L. Schiffman (Winona Lake, Ind., 1999), 593–634; Daniel Abrams, "Secret of All Secrets: The Idea of the Glory and Intention for Prayer in the Writings of R. Elazar of Worms" (Hebrew), *Da'at: A Journal of Jewish Philosophy and Kabbalah* 34 (Winter 1995): 61–81. In regard to *Ma'aseh bere'shit*, see the sources collected by Daniel Abrams in his *R. Asher ben David*, section 5, 299–353.

15. See, for example, R. Isaac the Blind, *Commentary to Sefer yetzirah* in the appendix to G. Scholem, *Ha-kabalah be-Provence*, ed. R. Schatz (Jerusalem, 1963), lines 36–46. Gershom Scholem observed that the Name was also understood to be the root of all sacred linguistic form by a wide range of kabbalistic thinkers. See G. Scholem, "The Name of God and the Linguistic Theory of the Kabbalah," *Diogenes* 80 (1973), part 2, pp. 164–95. Most recently, Elliot R. Wolfson has de-

emerges naturally in the context of *Sefer yetzirah* exegesis, where the forms of divine breath and the sounds of divine speech are said to be inscribed into the very matter of the universe.<sup>16</sup> Pedaya has also argued persuasively that the centrality of language as a metaphysical reality in R. Isaac's school stems directly from such Spanish Neoplatonists as R. Abraham Ibn Ezra and R. Abraham Bar Ḥiyya. As we will see, there are numerous key phrases and ideas that can be traced back to the work of Ibn Ezra.<sup>17</sup> The combination of the Neoplatonic grammarians and the rhetoric of *Sefer yetzirah* seems to have exercised a powerful and decisive influence on R. Isaac the Blind and his pupils. R. Asher ben David was the prime inheritor of this legacy, and he structured the entire edifice of his sefirotic thought around the graphic form of the divine Name.

Name mysticism in the school of R. Isaac is a theory of phonetic cosmogony, a conception of the emanation of the cosmos in terms of sound and speech. In this view, the Being of the world unfolds from the depths of the primordial Infinite as the sound of speech rises from the unformed breath of divine articulation. Rooted in the rhetoric of *Sefer yetzirah*, this conceptual rubric presents a process of emanation that moves from the most subtle of all breath and sound to the most definite and discrete of all articulated language.<sup>18</sup> In contrast to the classical rabbinic model of Creation, wherein divine speech creates something outside of itself, this

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veloped this theme of a linguistic ontology in great detail. In Wolfson's reading, the kabbalistic worldview was one in which the name of God lay at the core of being, defining the structure of nature and the essential fabric of human embodiment. The inescapably incarnate character of the human being and, more specifically, of the circumcised male Jew is itself a refraction of the divine textuality, a realization of the unity of God, Torah, and Israel. See the analysis in Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination* (New York, 2005), 190–260, 513–45.

16. On the matter of linguistic mysticism in the thought of R. Isaac, see Scholem, *Origins*, 264–67. On the impact of *Sefer yetzirah* upon the language-centered metaphysics of medieval kabbalists, see Yehuda Liebes, *Torat ha-yetsirah shel Sefer yetzirah* (Tel Aviv, 2000), 111–57.

17. See Pedaya, "Flaw and Correction," 161, n. 19, 165, n. 33.; idem, *Name and Sanctuary*, 75. See also Sendor, "Emergence of Provençal Kabbalah," 2:151–57.

18. Moshe Idel has proposed several typological categories for the understanding of kabbalistic conceptions of linguistic mysticism. See his essay "Reification of Language in Jewish Mysticism," in *Mysticism and Language*, ed. S. Katz (New York, 1992), 42–79. Idel distinguishes between the following types among others: "Letters: The Constitutive Elements of Creation," "The Talismanic Conception of Language," and "Monadic and Emanative Conceptions of the Letters." The type that I will examine in this study of R. Asher belongs mainly to the "Emanative" type.



early kabbalistic model presents the cosmic unfolding as a *speech act in itself*. The auto-emanation of the divine Being is thus the vocalization of a silent cosmic reality. God does not just speak the word of Creation. God *is* the word of Creation.<sup>19</sup> In this respect, the focus on the ontology of the divine name must be seen in the historical light of logos theology in Late Antiquity, the assertion that the world came to be *through* the ontological substance of a divine word, one that is inseparable from the very identity of that divine Speaker. For if there is a contrast to be noted between classical Judaic conceptions of creation and the medieval kabbalistic model of ontological contiguity, we cannot but observe the phenomenological foundation that is established by the logos theology formulated in the intersecting (and perhaps inextricable) threads of Hellenistic, Judaeo-Christian, and Jewish midrashic textuality.<sup>20</sup>

This kabbalistic emanational model further hinges on an interior-exterior vision of cosmic unfolding. The sefirotic cosmos is spoken into being, emerging from the most interior dimension of divine breath to the most exterior form of articulated language. As such, Creation moves outward in an ongoing dynamic of exteriorization. This idea of “interiority” was fundamental to early kabbalistic thought and its formulation of a theological metaphysic. As Moshe Idel has shown, the term *penimiyut* (interiority) came to refer to a deeper or more exalted dimension of the sefirotic

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19. Pedaya has pointed out the significant discrepancy in R. Isaac’s thought between light/visionary mysticism and sound/auditory mysticism. She cites this as one of several possible indications that R. Isaac was in fact blind and stresses the fact that R. Isaac’s use of linguistic mysticism is fundamentally phonetical/musical in character, as opposed to graphic in orientation. See H. Pedaya, “Flaw and Correction,” 159–62, and idem, *Vision and Speech: Models of Revelatory Experience in Jewish Mysticism* (Hebrew; Los Angeles, 2002). Visionary and light-centered mysticism have been integral to a wide array of Jewish mystics throughout the ages, as Elliot Wolfson’s work has amply demonstrated. See Wolfson, *Through a Speculum That Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton, N.J., 1994), esp. 287, n. 57. R. Isaac’s thought noticeably lacks the symbolism of light that is a dominant feature of this other kabbalistic literature. See Pedaya, “Flaw and Correction,” 162–63, n. 23. Generally speaking, R. Asher’s presentation of the emanational drama follows from his master’s model of phonetic mysticism. On the thematics of emanational flow, and with particular respect to the visual and linguistic models of such theological images, see Jonathan Garb, *Manifestations of Power in Jewish Mysticism: From Rabbinic Literature to Safed Kabbalah* (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 2005), 142–73.

20. On logos theology in Late Antiquity see, among others, Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia, 2004), esp. 89–147; Azzan Yadin, *Scripture as Logos: Rabbi Ishmael and the Origins of Midrash* (Philadelphia, 2004), esp. 11–20, 29–33, and 168–75.

universe. He argues that a variety of thirteenth-century kabbalistic thinkers believed that the sefirotic cosmos contains an additional set of ten powers that stand either above the *sefirot* or at their innermost core.<sup>21</sup> Both R. Isaac and R. Asher frequently employ the terminology of *penimiyut* in depicting the flow of emanational movement as it is eventually transformed into materialized speech.<sup>22</sup> For R. Asher in particular this exteriorization of cosmic reality is a process of revelation as well, in which the hidden dimensions of the cosmos become increasingly revealed. The living speech of divine reality moves progressively from the most concealed elements of cosmic sound to the most revealed, sending forth the energy of divine breath into the interconnected chain of cosmic Being. This energizing, life-bestowing breath is correlated to the Hebrew letter *alef*, the purest element of sacred language. The breath of the *alef*, the open-mouthed vowel that precedes all ordered speech and lies beneath

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21. M. Idel, "The *Sefirot* above the *Sefirot*" (Hebrew), *Tarbits* 51 (1982): 239–80. See also idem, "The Image of Man above the *Sefirot*" (Hebrew), *Da'at* 4 (1980): 41–56. This "inner dimension" stands on the border of *En-Sof* and *Keter*, finding expression in *Keter* despite the fact that it technically stands above the sefirotic structure. Idel considers this mythic configuration to be crucial for the transmission of Jewish esotericism from Late Antiquity to the early Kabbalah. The ten potencies, structured in anthropomorphic form and called the *penimiyut* of the sefirotic cosmos, are also given the label of the ten divine utterances (*ma'amarot*). Idel argues that already in Jewish antiquity these "utterances" had assumed an ontological-hypostatic character for esoteric thinkers, and that this tradition ultimately culminated in the metaphysical rhetoric of *Sefer ha-bahir*. In light of this argument made by Idel concerning the *ma'amarot*, the dynamic of ontological divine speech stressed by R. Isaac the Blind and R. Asher ben David acquires a special force: the linguistic-phonetic model of emanationism seems to be intimately bound to the identification of the divine speech-utterances with the unfolding of the *sefirot*. For an example in which R. Asher employs the term "utterances" in reference to his conception of phonetic emanation, see *R. Asher ben David*, 111: "For all the entities (*devarim*) spread forth from cause to cause (*me-ilab le-ilab*), and from utterance to utterance (*me-ma'amar le-ma'amar*), until they have moved [from potentiality] to actuality." On the question of the anthropic nature of the inner (or upper) decad, as well as its relationship to the ten divine utterances, also consult Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, 32–34, 112–22.

22. On the term *penimi*, see Pedaya, "Flaw and Correction," 166, n. 35; Sender, "Emergence of Provençal Kabbalah," vol. 1, chapter 7, vol. 2, 152, n. 34. R. Asher ben David also uses the term *penimi* to describe the interrelationship between human epistemology and cosmic ontology. In his schema, the *koah ha-penimi* (the inner force) emerges from the depths of the Infinite as the first palpable manifestation of the sefirotic emanation. *Penimi* does not necessarily connote transcendence and hierarchy in R. Asher's thought but rather refers to the most primal dimension of the emanational chain that is progressively revealed through subsequent *sefirot*. See *R. Asher ben David*, 105.

all articulation, flows through the speech-forms of the four letters of the Tetragrammaton, unfolding in a dynamic of graduated self-revelation. As R. Asher states early on in his *Commentary to the Divine Name*:

And when these four letters—*Yod, Heb, Vav, Heb*—are joined together, they are called *Shem ha-meforash* (the Ineffable Name) on account of its letters that become revealed from hidden secret to hidden secret (*mi-seter el seter*) until the end of all hidden secrets (*ad sof kol seter*). [These] unfold from vowel to vowel (*mi-tenu 'ab le-tenu'ab*),<sup>23</sup> from the beginning of the vowel-movement of the *alef* that engenders a *seter*. And that *seter* [brought forth by the *alef*] brings forth—from the very inception of its vowel-movement—another *seter* that does not resemble [the one before it]. And then the *seter* that came forth from the previous *seter* brings forth [a further] *seter*, until the total completion of all *setarim*. All goes forth from the *seter* that comes from the vowel-movement of the *alef*.<sup>24</sup>

We may first of all note the powerful cadence that runs through this passage. R. Asher uses the word “*seter*” to set a rhythmic tone, as though he intended to convey the ceaseless and melodic flow of cosmic energy through the sound of his own rhetoric. The two words, *seter* and *tenu 'ab*, function here as axial points for the emanational dynamic as it progresses from silence to articulation. In reading and vocalizing this text, we are allowed to sense the recurring rhythm of divine unfolding, as the Name itself passes through successive layers of *setarim*. This tradition has roots in the writings of the Neoplatonic grammarians, who use the term “*seter*” to correlate directly to the four letters of open sound: *alef, heb, vav, and yod*.<sup>25</sup> These letters are the “secret” dimensions inasmuch as they are the root-breath of all speech that may be formed. Yet the idea of a grammatical *seter* is here charged with an ontological-hypostatic nature. Each *seter* is itself a stage in the emanation of the cosmos and is identical with the ontological reality of the created universe. In choosing to employ this terminology, R. Asher depicts the event of Creation as a dynamic of un-

23. This word, which is also translatable as “movement,” serves a dual function in R. Asher’s writing. It is both the unfolding of vowels into developed sound and speech, and the energized movement that pulses from stage to stage in the sefirotic emanation.

24. *Sefer ha-yihud*, D. Abrams, ed., *R. Asher ben David: His Complete Works and Studies in His Kabbalistic Thought* (Los Angeles, 1996), 103.

25. See Roland Goetchel, “Eheyeh Asher Eheyeh etsel mekubale Gerona,” *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 6 (1987): 294–95.

covering, a process in which the primordial breath courses through gradations of concealment and completes itself when the last (and most perceptible) *seter* is reached. Here the images of Creation and revelation are seamlessly interwoven, and the emergence of Being is identical to the self-revelation of divinity.

The force of the *alef* stands behind the movement from vowel to vowel in a complex interlocking of sounds on their way to ordered speech. In each vowel the presence of the vitalizing *alef* is found, propelling each open-breath sound toward ultimate realization in articulative creativity.<sup>26</sup> In R. Asher's view, the letters of the Tetragrammaton (in addition to the *alef*) are also located within each phonetic articulation, as the energies of the first dimensions of emanation can always be found in the lower ones. Because, as the Neoplatonic grammarians noticed, these letters function in Hebrew as the consonantal signs for unwritten open-breath vowel sounds, the divine Name represents the primordial deep structure that animates the cosmos. The Tetragrammaton energizes Being as the vowel-breaths of language give birth to articulated sounds.<sup>27</sup> For R. Asher, these reflections on the nature of Hebrew language and form mirror the linguistic properties of the emanated cosmos. Just as the letters *alef*, *beb*, *vav*, and *yod* can be found—sometimes explicitly, and other times implicitly—in the vowels of Hebrew words, so too can these letters of open-breath be found in the stages of cosmic self-revelation. R. Asher reinforces this thought with a clever pun on the Hebrew term *Shem ha-meforash* (the divine Name), emphasizing its revelatory character:

The four-letter Name is called *Shem ha-meforash* because it becomes revealed [*mitgaleb*] and spreads forth [*mitparev*] in its entirety from *seter* to *seter* until the end of all *seter* that comes from the start of the vowel-movements of the *alef*.<sup>28</sup>

As I have already intimated, the essential nature of the Tetragrammaton is that of a cosmic organism which progresses from concealment to re-

26. This point is one of the key issues traceable back to the metaphysical-grammatical theory of R. Abraham Ibn Ezra. See, for example, *Sefer tsabot* 3, 13b. Cf. Pedaya, "Flaw and Correction," 165 n. 33.

27. The written forms of vocalized vowels include hints of this metaphysical fact. A word that employs the *kamatz* vowel, for instance, may include either the *alef* or the *beb* in its graphic expression. The *tsere* vowel may include a *yod*, a *beb*, or an *alef*; the *holam* vowel points toward a *vav*, and the *hirik* vowel may be graphized in a word with a *yod* after it. See *R. Asher ben David*, 104.

28. *Ibid.*

vealment. This decisive piece of the divine Name's character is exegetically conveyed by R. Asher through a pun on the Hebrew root, *p-r-s*. The graphic form of the Name contains the emanational edifice within itself, receiving the inaugural vowel-movement from the *alef* that appears to stand beyond. This metaphysical *alef* channels the most subtle cosmic energy into the borders of the divine Name, stimulating the outward (or downward) flow of sefirotic life. R. Asher continues:

It would seem that the *alef* should have been placed last in the order of the [Hebrew] alphabet, insofar as she is more inward and hidden than all the other letters. [She was placed first, however,] so as to reveal her supreme stature, as well as to make known that all who come after her suckle (*yoneket*) [energy] from her.<sup>29</sup> From her all become blessed (*mitbarkhot*) and all are sustained, and through her every letter can be formed. If you flip her in all directions, you shall be able to build each and every letter from her.<sup>30</sup>

R. Asher implies that one would indeed expect the order of the alphabet to reflect a movement from the most revealed to the most hidden, instead of beginning with the most mysterious dimension (the *alef*). Yet, in his view, the most esoteric realm is mentioned before all else (in the alphabetical order) because that concealed dimension is the ultimate root for the growth of the progressively revealed sefirotic universe. Every element of the cosmic structure—represented in its totality by the four letters of the divine Name—depends upon the first cause that is symbolized by the *alef*.

29. The idea of *yenikab* (suckling) is central to the thought of R. Asher's mentor, R. Isaac, who in his *Commentary to Sefer Yetzirah* uses this term frequently to discuss the flow of emanation. See Scholem, *Ha-kabalah be-Provence*, 9, ll. 192–201.

30. R. Asher ben David, 104. It should be noted that Abraham Ibn Ezra had already reflected upon the reasons behind the place of the *alef* at the head of the alphabet. See Pedaya, "Flaw and Correction," 165, n. 33; and idem, *Ha-shem ve-ha-mikdash*, 76, 92–102. The last line of the above-cited passage may have a dual connotation. Each letter can be vocalized through the life-bestowing power of the *alef*, but R. Asher also seems to imply that the graphized form of the *alef* contains the building blocks for the written construction of all other Hebrew letters. "If you flip her in all directions, you shall be able to build each and every letter from her." R. Asher evidently sees the *alef* as both the source of all sound and the source of all form. Though it perhaps goes without saying, the female terminology here associated with the *alef* is primarily a reflection of the fact that Hebrew lacks a neuter form. That said, however, the usage of the term *yoneket* (suckles/nurses from) has clear gendered implications, and one could certainly argue that the cosmic *alef* assumes a feminine posture vis-à-vis the lower *sefirot*.

Not only is the *alef* the root-breath of all potential speech and language, it is the force of cosmic sustenance and font of blessing to the more revealed dimensions of reality. Everything rests upon the ground of the *alef*. This conception may be compared with a strikingly parallel passage found in the *Bahir*:<sup>31</sup>

The *alef* is the head (or: the beginning) of all the letters. And what is more, *alef* causes all the other letters to exist. *Alef* is like the mind, for just as when you think of the *alef* you open your mouth, so too with thought (in the mind) — [which results in speech]. From the *alef* all of the other letters emerged (or: went forth).

But what is the sefirotic status of the *alef* itself? We have seen that the *alef* animates the flow of sefirotic energy and propels the cosmic organism from the concealed to the revealed. Does that imply a transcendence of the *alef* beyond the limits of sefirotic life? Is the *alef* but a cognate for the Infinite domain of *En-Sof*, or does its symbolic valence have a different meaning? The beginning of an answer to these questions is provided by R. Asher:

[The *alef*] points toward the [cosmic] unity more than all the other letters do. And even though there is no proof for this point [in Scripture], there is a hint to this effect [in Ps 100.3]: “Know that the Lord is God. He has made us, *ve-lo’ anaḥnu*. His people . . .” *Ve-lo’* is written [in the biblical text,] with an *alef* [i.e. *lamed-alef*], and *ve-lo’* is vocalized [in the Masoretic tradition,] with a *vav* [i.e. *lamed-vav*]. There is legitimacy [and authority] to the [respective readings] of both Scripture and tradition (*yesb em la-mikra’ ve-yesb ’em la-masoret*). The meaning of *ve-lo’*, when written with an *alef*, is “*ve-la-alef anaḥnu*,” (we belong to the *alef*). That is to say: we belong to [or derive from] the perfect unity, from whom everything derives blessing, constantly, and without any cessation. *Ve-lo’* with a *vav* [alludes to the fact that] we are a people [that is loyal] to him, and to no other.<sup>32</sup>

This complex text requires some initial clarification. R. Asher’s exegesis of Ps 100.3 turns on the juxtaposition of the written biblical form *ve-lo’*, graphized as *vav-lamed-alef*, with the Masoretic tradition to read this word

31. See Daniel Abrams, ed., *The Book Babir: An Edition Based on the Earliest Manuscripts* (Hebrew; Los Angeles, 1994), 145 (§48).

32. *Ibid.*, 105. Cf. Radak on this verse.

as *ve-lo*, graphized *vav-lamed-vav*. Read literally, the biblical form yields an ambiguous meaning, a fact which was problematic for rabbinic exegetes, and which led Masoretic authorities to read the text as “we belong to him,” or “we are loyal to him.” In the passage above, R. Asher has used this difference between written text and articulated text as an exegetical opportunity. While he demonstrates the interpretive legitimacy of both readings, his real motivation is to reveal the metaphysical power of the cosmic *alef* through a clever pointing of the graphized biblical text. The elliptical *alef* of *ve-lo* is elevated to the status of a noun, the supernal subject of the cosmic reality from which everything derives. Through this hermeneutical move, R. Asher seeks to demonstrate the interconnectedness of all Being from the highest (or most interior) dimensions of the cosmos down to the lower, human realms.<sup>33</sup> Everything is bound in complete and perfect unity, deriving blessing and strength from the vitalizing power of the *alef*.

A striking parallel to this passage, one that sheds considerable light on the sefirotic status of the *alef*, is found in *Sefer ha-bahir*. In that source we find a very similar version of the same exegetical dynamic:

What are the ten utterances? The first<sup>34</sup> is supreme crown (*keter 'elyon*), blessed, blessed be its name and its people. And who are its people? Israel, as it is written: “Know that he is God. He has made us, *ve-lo' anahnu*. His people . . .” [We belong to the *alef*], to recognize and know the One of Ones, singular in all his names.<sup>35</sup>

In this text we see a conceptual link that is not made by R. Asher in his *Commentary to the Divine Name*. The *alef* is not left without a precise sefirotic correlation, as it was in R. Asher's text; it is identified directly with the first *sefirah*, *keter 'elyon*.<sup>36</sup> Keter is also here called the “first utterance,”

33. On the interconnectedness of Being in the thought of R. Isaac the Blind, see M. Sendor, “Emergence of Provençal Kabbalah,” 1:130–36 and 1:246–61. In a comparative vein, see A. O. Lovejoy *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (Cambridge, Mass., 1950).

34. Significantly for our purposes, “the first” is simply indicated in the manuscript text by an *alef*.

35. Abrams, ed., *The Book Bahir*, 181 (§96).

36. This passage from the *Bahir* was examined by Arthur Green in his discussion of the symbol of *Keter* in the early Kabbalah. See A. Green, *Keter: The Crown of God in Early Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton, N.J., 1997), 134–36. A central feature of Green's analysis of the *Keter* symbol in the early Kabbalah is to demonstrate how a single and unified crown symbol in prior mystical literature eventually metamorphosed into a crown symbol divided in two. The higher (or, in our case,

a description which fits well into the paradigm of phonetic mysticism as expressed by R. Isaac and R. Asher.<sup>37</sup>

From the substantial overlap between our two texts concerning Ps 100.3, I would argue that the *alef* of R. Asher's text may be read in the light of the *Babir*'s formulation. The precise relationship between the early Provençal kabbalists and the *Babir* is still debated by modern scholars, although Pedaya has contributed a great deal to the exploration of new avenues of research.<sup>38</sup> She has suggested that the editorial hand of someone belonging to the school of R. Isaac the Blind may be detected in the *Babir*, and that consequently the early Provençal kabbalists had a greater impact upon the final form of the *Babir* than was previously thought.<sup>39</sup> Her main support for this claim is the perceivable mark of Neoplatonic thought and rhetoric in isolated instances in the *Babir*, most importantly with respect to the metaphysical *alef*.<sup>40</sup> This Neoplatonic paradigm, Pedaya argues, is completely uncharacteristic of the *Babir* literature in general, while it is highly characteristic of R. Isaac the Blind's thought. Furthermore, Pedaya notes, no trace of influence from the *Babir* can be detected in R. Isaac's writings. In my view, given the fact that R. Asher ben David was R. Isaac's main disciple, R. Asher may himself have been

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more inward) crown came to be known as *keter 'elyon*, as we see in the *Babir* example, while the lower crown received the appellation "*Atarah*," a name given to the tenth *sefirah*, known as *Malkhut* or *Shekhinah*. Green argues that the fundamental cosmic mystery espoused by classical kabbalists was the drama of the reunion of these split crowns on the two ends of the sefirotic universe. See Green, 138, 140, 153–56, 160–65.

37. Recall M. Idel's analysis of this correlation in "The *Sefirot* above the *Sefirot*."

38. H. Pedaya, "The Provençal Editorial Stratum in *Sefer ha-babir*" (Hebrew), *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 9 (1990): 139–64. For a different line of exploration, see Ronit Meroz, "On the Time and Place of Some of *Sefer ha-babir*" (Hebrew), *Da 'at* 49 (2002): 137–80; idem, "The Middle Eastern Origins of Kabbalah," *Journal for the Study of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jewry* 1.1 (2007), particularly 49–56.

39. Although Scholem had also noted a late Provençal stratum of redaction in the *Babir*, he did not go so far as to emphasize the traces of redaction attributable to a member of R. Isaac the Blind's mystical circle. See his *Origins*, 49–198. On the probability that a member of R. Isaac's circle participated in the final redaction of the *Babir*, see Pedaya, "The Provençal Editorial Stratum in *Sefer ha-babir*," 160.

40. The depiction of the letter *alef*, and its relationship to the rest of the letters of the alphabet, is in fact a depiction of the emanational process on the Neoplatonic model; the *alef* is characterized here as effecting and sustaining the existence of all the letters. See Pedaya, *ibid.*, 150.



involved in shaping and redacting the Bahiric traditions.<sup>41</sup> The identical exegesis of Ps 100.3 in R. Asher's text and in the *Bahir* certainly points in that direction.<sup>42</sup>

The parallel between R. Asher's *Commentary* and *Sefer ha-bahir* §96 suggests that the former's intended meaning when employing the symbolism of the *alef* is to connote the *sefirah Keter*. A confirmation of this sefirotic status appears explicitly only once in the entire text of R. Asher's *Commentary*, although the symbolism of the animating *alef* is mentioned time and again. And although the terms "*Keter*" and "*Keter 'elyon*" are completely absent from R. Asher's *Commentary*, we do find the following suggestive remarks:

The *alef* is the first *sefirah*, the one that brought everything into existence as [an organic] unity, through his primal Will.<sup>43</sup> She is the source

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41. *Ibid.*, 152–53.

42. It may be added that this use of Ps 100.3 to allude to *keter 'elyon* is also found in R. Ezra of Gerona's *Commentary to the Talmudic Aggadot*, MS Vatican 244. See the reprinted text with extensive commentary in H. Pedaya, "'Possessed by Speech': Towards an Understanding of the Prophetic-Ecstatic Pattern among Early Kabbalists" (Hebrew), *Tarbits* 65 (1996): 570–73. Also see the pioneering study by Isaiah Tishby, "Aggadah and Kabbalah in the Commentaries on the Aggadot by R. Ezra and R. Azriel of Gerona," reprinted in Tishby, *Studies in Kabbalah and Its Branches: Researches and Sources* (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 1982), 1:31–35. The fact that this exegesis appears also in the writings of R. Ezra suggests that this tradition arose out of the school of R. Isaac the Blind. Whether or not R. Ezra was also involved in the final redaction of *Sefer ha-bahir* remains unclear, but it is fair to say that the Ps 100.3 tradition had Provençal roots. Modern scholarship has tended to assume that R. Ezra was one of those erring students of R. Isaac the Blind who prompted the sharp rebuke of more senior kabbalists and critics such as R. Meir b. Simon of Narbonne. Pedaya remarks that, given his age and reverential status, R. Ezra was more likely a "companion" or peer to R. Isaac, rather than a wayward disciple. See Pedaya, "'Possessed by Speech,'" 629; *idem*, *Vision and Speech: Models of Revelatory Experience in Jewish Mysticism* (Hebrew; Los Angeles, 2002), 137–207.

43. Other early kabbalists seem to affirm this understanding of the *alef* symbolism. See, for example, R. Jacob bar Sheshet's *Sefer ha-'emunah ve-ha-bitahon*, in *Kitve Ramban*, ed. C. Chavel (Jerusalem, 1964), 385–86, where he claims that the *alef* in the terminology of the kabbalists correlates directly to the "divine Will" of the Jewish philosophers, and that the metaphysical *alef* is the "force of awakening" and downward flow of cosmic energy. The use of the term "primal Will" to connote the first *sefirah* in the early Kabbalah betrays the significant influence of medieval Neoplatonic philosophy. Scholem has argued that this is one of the conceptual issues that is traceable back to the Jewish philosopher-poet Solomon Ibn Gabirol. See G. Scholem, "'*Ikvotav shel Gabirol ba-kabalab*'" in *Me'asef sofre Erets Yisrael* (Tel Aviv, 1940), 160–78. Both R. Jacob bar Sheshet and R. Asher

of blessing, and the flow that is drawn from her is like a spring from which all of the garden is irrigated. Everything depends on her, while she does not need . . . even one of them. Because of this, they did not count her among the *sefirot*.<sup>44</sup>

R. Asher's comments here reflect the considerable ambiguity that surrounded this symbol in the early Kabbalah. *Alef* is indeed part of the sefirotic structure (insofar as it is counted among the *sefirot*) and serves as the foundation for the Being of the rest of the *sefirot*, but still stands apart from them in the cosmic arrangement. Through the *alef* (or through *keter* 'elyon) the cosmic reality moves from a state of nonexistence to one of existence; or put differently, the first *sefirah* effects the dynamic of *creatio ex nihilo*. *Alef* still stands, of course, on the side of Nothingness in this great cosmic divide, though the first moment of emanational uncovering comes about precisely through her/its stimulus. While everything is entirely dependent on the *alef*, her own "needs" transcend the other *sefirot*, positing a relationship of unidirectional need in the sefirotic hierarchy. This is the reason, R. Asher explains, for the fact that *Sefer yetsirah*, and perhaps other kabbalists of R. Asher's generation, did not consider *alef/keter* to be a distinct *sefirah*.<sup>45</sup> Instead, some early kabbalists posited that *Keter* was indistinguishable from *En-Sof*, or at the very least, a domain utterly removed from the other *sefirot*.

R. Isaac the Blind himself described the realm of the first *sefirah* in apophatic terms, calling it "that which thought cannot apprehend" though it is clear that R. Isaac considered *Rom* (*Keter*) to be an ontic part

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ben David openly discuss the commonalities in conceptual discourse between the kabbalists and the Jewish philosophers. See *R. Asher ben David*, 108. For both of these mystics, the philosophers and the kabbalists each recognize the fundamental truth of a cosmos oriented by metaphysical decads, albeit that these two intellectual groups express this fact in different ways. The symbolic languages of Kabbalah and philosophy are therefore understood to be grounded in similar metaphysical perspectives, despite the fact that their respective rhetorics are so fundamentally different one from the other. This point is especially surprising coming from R. Jacob bar Sheshet, insofar as he is also the author of the highly antiphilosophical treatise *Sefer meshiv devarim nekhobim*, ed. G. Vajda (Jerusalem, 1968).

44. *R. Asher ben David*, 105.

45. Arthur Green notes that there was considerable disagreement among the early kabbalists as to the sefirotic status of *Keter*. While some thinkers held that *Keter* was of one essence with *En-Sof*, others asserted that *Keter* was the first of the *sefirot*. See Green, *Keter: The Crown of God in Early Jewish Mysticism*, 153–54; and earlier Isaiah Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar* (Hebrew and English; Oxford, 1989), 1:242–43.

of the sefirotic chain. R. Asher seems to have incorporated some of this apophatic perspective into his rhetoric as well, avoiding the classical kabbalistic terminology for the first *sefirah* and positing its transcendent indifference to the workings of the lower ones.<sup>46</sup> The question of why R. Asher is so reluctant to mention *Keter* by name, or even its symbolic cognate, *Rom*, is an intriguing problem. The answer most probably lies in the fact that his master, R. Isaac the Blind, also refrained from extensive use of such terminology, preferring instead to call the first *sefirah* “that which [human] thought does not grasp.” The successive sefirotic stages that follow *Keter* are generally referred to by the standard terminology of early kabbalistic symbolism (i.e., *Hokhmah*, *Binah*, etc.) in both R. Isaac’s and R. Asher’s work. Such a trend does not run counter to R. Asher’s exoterizing tendencies but rather reflects a combination of apophatic and cataphatic mystical discourse.

THE SEFIROTIC ONTOLOGY OF THE DIVINE NAME AND THE  
GENESIS OF METAPHYSICAL SOUND

With the transition from the first *sefirah* to the subsequent nine of the emanation, we see the beginning of the written Tetragrammaton. While the *alef* represents the elusive open-breath of cosmic generativity, the di-

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46. On the dialectic between apophatic and cataphatic mysticism among the early kabbalists, see E. R. Wolfson, “Negative Theology and Positive Assertion in the Early Kabbalah,” *Da’at* 32/33 (1994): v–xxii. Wolfson’s ultimate claim in this essay is that the early kabbalists attributed a personalistic, anthropomorphic, gendered character to the cosmic Infinite (*En-Sof*), and asserted that cataphatic, positive knowledge of *En-Sof* is possible for the mystic in contemplation. On the inability to distinguish *En-Sof* and the *sefirot* in the moment of religious experience, see p. xi. For a recent and very suggestive consideration of the *En-Sof*—one that aims to identify antecedent sources that treat the concept of *En-Sof* as a nominal, rather than an adverbial reality—see Moshe Idel, “‘Al torat ha-’elohut be-re’shit ha-kabbalah” in *Shefa’ tal: ‘Iyunim be-maḥshevet yisra’el u-ve-tarbut yehudit: Mugaashim li-Vrakhav Zak*, ed. Z. Gries, H. Kreisel, and B. Huss (Beer Sheva, 2004), 131–48. For a comparative discussion of apophysis in non-Jewish mystical sources, see Michael Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unwaying* (Chicago, 1994). In addition to discussing the role of apophysis in such thinkers as Plotinus, Ibn Arabi, Marguerite Porete, and Meister Eckhart, Sells examines this question in the thought of John the Scot Eriugena, a mystic whose possible influence on early kabbalistic thinkers has been extensively discussed by modern scholars. See Scholem, *Origins*, 270, n. 154; Idel, “The *Sefirot* above the *Sefirot*,” 266–77; Sendor, “Emergence of Provençal Kabbalah,” 1:188–98. For further analysis of the dynamic relationship between apophatic and cataphatic discourse in thirteenth-century Kabbalah, see Eitan Fishbane, “Mystical Contemplation and the Limits of the Mind: The Case of *Sheqel ha-Qodesh*,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 93.1/2 (2002): 1–27.

vine Name itself represents the inauguration of articulated speech—the transformation of Divinity from the complete concealment of interiority to the disclosure of exteriority.<sup>47</sup> According to R. Asher, the letter *yod* that begins the ineffable Name signifies the transformation into a recognizable reality, an existence that presses beyond the Nothingness of primal essence. R. Asher is careful to emphasize, however, that this transition into palpable reality does not imply first-*sefirab* status to the *yod*, despite the fact that the undivided emanational stream coming from *En-Sof* might lead one to think otherwise:

Because of the flow of blessing that comes from *En-Sof*, and that ceaselessly spreads forth into *Hokhmah* it would seem as though *Hokhmah* is the first *sefirab* . . . The inner force is that which is called Nothing (*Ayin*), for [human] thought cannot reach that place or imagine it, no thought can grasp onto it—that is *Ayin*. About it is said (Job 28.12): “Wisdom will arise out of Nothing.” And when the author of *Sefer yetzirah* counted the *sefirot*, he did not begin from the *alef* other than through hinted allusion by means of *Hokhmah*, which is the *yod* that is at the beginning of the Tetragrammaton. Our rabbis . . . called [this realm] “the World that is coming,” and they said that through *yod* the ‘*olam ba-ba*’ was created.<sup>48</sup> I [R. Asher] would like to say that the *yod* is a world (*‘olam*) [whose purpose is to receive] the inner force that comes (*ba-ba*) constantly, and ceaselessly.<sup>49</sup>

To the epistemologically limited perception of the human mystic, *En-Sof* passes directly into the *sefirab* of *Hokhmah*, without any emanational divide. Yet as we have seen, for R. Asher the *alef* itself is the first *sefirab* of the emanational chain, and it is only through that *alef* that the subsequent *sefirot* can emerge into perceivable Being. In the text above, the first *sefirab* (which remains *alef/keter*) is given two appellations. The first one, to which I have already alluded in my discussion of cosmic inwardness, is *Keter*, that dimension of interiority that breathes life into the *sefirot*, in a dynamic of progressive revelation. The second appellation is that of *Ayin*,

47. In the thought of several early kabbalists, the *alef* alludes to a Name that is more exalted and transcendent. It is called the *Ebeyeh* name, graphized as *alef-beh-yod-beh*. See Roland Goetchel, “Eheyeh Asher Eheyeh,” 287–98; Sendor, “Emergence of Provençal Kabbalah,” 2:154–58, nn. 41–47.

48. See J. Theodor and Ch. Albeck, eds., *Midrash Bereshit Rabbah* (1965; reprint Jerusalem, 1996), 108–9 (§12:10).

49. *R. Asher ben David*, 105–6.

or the Nothing, a widely used term for *Keter*.<sup>50</sup> In this characterization, where *Keter* is described as the dimension (of the *sefirot*) most elusive to human consciousness, we encounter a prominent instance of apophatic thought in R. Asher's writing, one which clearly derives from his teacher R. Isaac the Blind.<sup>51</sup> *Hokhmah* appears to be the first *sefirah*, insofar as *Keter/Ayin* stands in unique relationship to the realm of *En-Sof*. *Ayin* is configured on the border between the sefirotic chain and the concealed dimensions of the Infinite, eluding recognizable distinction from *En-Sof* in the perception of human consciousness. R. Asher argues that *Ayin* is fundamentally paradoxical and mysterious, appearing to be identical to *En-Sof* in terms of human epistemology, while remaining the distinct beginning of the sefirotic chain.

We encounter here the conceptual dialectic that lies at the heart of early kabbalistic symbolism. For while the kabbalists posit that the entire cosmic system, from *En-Sof* down to the tenth *sefirah*, is one entity, they also distinguish between *En-Sof* and the highest *sefirot*, as well as between the highest *sefirot* and the lowest. R. Asher's formulation is very telling. The reason why one might mistakenly see *Hokhmah* as the first *sefirah* is that there are no cessations in the flow of cosmic energy. Each of the ten *sefirot* are, as we have seen, progressive moments in the revelation of *En-Sof* and are not *ontologically* different from their root in *En-Sof*. Thus, although no ontological difference exists in the cosmos (since all is *En-Sof*), the *sefirot* have a different epistemological status from *En-Sof*. One must not think, as I read R. Asher, that *Hokhmah* is the first *sefirah*, since there is still one layer of Being that stands before the epistemologically concealed dimension of *En-Sof*. Yet that first level (*Keter/Ayin*) in the revelation itself is virtually as concealed as the unknowable dimension that precedes it, differing from *En-Sof* only insofar as its generative powers are somewhat depictable. The limited degree of cataphasis associated with the *alef* may be seen in the remark "from the start of the vowel-movement of the *alef*." It would be unthinkable for the kabbalists to ascribe a discrete "beginning" to the mysterious inwardness of *En-Sof*, although such a statement may indeed be made about the first stage of cosmic self-revelation.

The second stage in the process of emanation, *Hokhmah's* very essence

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50. See Daniel Matt, "Ayin: The Concept of Nothingness in Jewish Mysticism," in *The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy*, ed. R. Forman (New York, 1990), 121–59 (reprinted in Lawrence Fine, ed., *Essential Papers on Kabbalah* [New York, 1995]).

51. See, for example, R. Isaac the Blind, *Commentary to Sefer yetzirah*, 3, ll. 57–61.

points toward the existence of the first *sefirah*, unmentioned by the author of *Sefer yetzirah*. R. Asher asserts that although the first *sefirah* was ostensibly ignored in this foundational work, its existence was implied in the description of *Hokhmah*.<sup>52</sup> In a clever play on a rabbinic myth regarding the cosmogenerative power of the letter *yoḏ*, R. Asher posits that it is a channel for divine creativity in flux. It is the “the World that is Coming” (*olam ba-ba*) in the sense that it is a metaphysical world that channels the flow of unceasing energy coming (*ba-ba*) from the *sefirah* *alef* that precedes it, moving the revelatory process one step further to actualization. In phonetic symbolism, the *yoḏ* that is *Hokhmah* brings the silence of the *alef*-breath into its first manifestation of sound. As R. Asher states:

For this reason, the author of *Sefer yetzirah* . . . (SY 1:9) called [*Hokhmah*] “The Sacred Breath of the Living God.” These are his words: “One is the Breath of the Living God, blessed, and blessed be the Name of the Life of the Worlds—voice, breath, and speech.” This is the sacred breath [or spirit]. He included three things in this, yet it is all from one entity. The sparkle of the voice (*kol*) sparkles forth from the subtle inner breath for there is voice even without any breath sent out [from the “inner breath”]. The [inner breath] causes the voice [to arise]. And after [the voice], breath that is increasingly perceptible (*muwag*) [goes forth], just like real breath [moves from the imperceptible to the perceptible]. And [this breath] is very subtle. About it was said (1 Kgs 19.12): “The subtle voice of silence.” After [that breath] comes breath that is ever-increasingly perceptible, until it spreads forth into speech. This issue reflects what [the author of *Sefer yetzirah*] alluded to at the beginning of his book (SY 1:1): “*Be-sefer, u-sefar, ve-sipur*.” Everything is held *in potentia* in *sefer*, in the pathways that are inscribed into him, until the entire order of entities—the *sefar* and the *sipur*—are brought forth, and everything that is within them becomes revealed through them. In this passage [from *Sefer yetzirah*], when the author came to count the *sefirot*, he called them “voice, breath, and speech.” All of these [dimensions] testify to the fact that everything is one entity, and that there is one spirit [or breath] to everything. That *sefirah* which was called “Breath of the Living God” because of the flow that is drawn into her from the source of the *alef* that testifies to the unity, [holds] the One that is unified in her, and all the powers that

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52. On the elaborate hermeneutics brought to bear upon *Sefer yetzirah*, especially in regard to the perception of its implied meaning, see M. Sendor, “Emergence of Provençal Kabbalah,” 1:74–88.

are placed within her, and all the pathways and inscriptions that are within her. And through that flow [of energy] that comes from the *alef* without any cessation, this *sefirah* is called “One,” and She is the beginning of all existence). And the One that brings [*Hokhmah*] into existence is called “Cause of Causes” (*Ilut ha-‘ilot ve-sibat ha-sibot*). For this reason did [*Sefer yetzirah*] say, “Blessed, and Blessed be His Name,” for each entity that comes after it [the Cause of Causes] is called a “Name” to the one that is [directly] above itself, [all the way] until the end of all the *sefirot*.<sup>53</sup>

This intricate text makes the phonetic mysticism of R. Asher’s thought far more explicit. Building upon the terminology and linguistic speculations of *Sefer yetzirah*, R. Asher centers upon the living dynamic of metaphysical articulation and conceptualizes the primal stages of sefirotic emanation in three fundamental phases of speech. The first of these, “Voice” [*kol*], remains amorphous and hidden and seems to be a clear symbol for *Keter*. This stage of articulation precedes the birth of cognizable reality, identified unequivocally as *Hokhmah*. Voice emerges from the most inward and esoteric dimension of the cosmos, existing in unique relationship to that most inner point of mystery. In depicting this process, R. Asher skillfully blends audial imagery with that of visual brilliance, thereby conveying a synesthetic vision of the cosmic self-revelation.<sup>54</sup> Voice sparkles forth from the primordial inner breath of Infinity, the sound of its dynamic movement illuminating the path of divine unfolding. The Voice’s audial nature is thus also depictable as a visual sparkling of light.<sup>55</sup> The seeming paradox of this synesthesia may serve to convey the irreducibility of the cosmogenerative mystery to a single sense perception.

53. R. Asher ben David, 106.

54. On the question of synesthesia in religious creativity, see David Chidester, *Word and Light: Seeing, Hearing, and Religious Discourse* (Urbana, Ill., 1992).

55. The phonetic sefirotology that R. Asher discusses in exegesis of *Sefer yetzirah* is clearly derived in large part from the teachings of his mentor. In R. Isaac the Blind’s *Commentary to Sefer yetzirah*, the master makes a similar point concerning the correlation between voice/breath imagery and the dynamic of sefirotic emanation. Yet the conceptual focus of R. Isaac remains upon the musical/vocal qualities of progressive emanation, and far less on any light/visual component (as I have discussed in earlier notes). R. Isaac speaks of the successive tones of the voice as it is transformed into sefirotic reality. He calls these “tones of the flow of breath” and “tones of the voice” on its way to articulative form. These images arise directly out of the same lines from *Sefer yetzirah* that drive R. Asher to his interpretive and imaginative insights. See R. Isaac the Blind, *Commentary to Sefer yetzirah*, appendix to G. Scholem *Ha-kabalah be-Provence*, 6, 9–10. The addition of

Breath stands on either side of the dimension of Voice—the symbolic cognate of the *alef* we encountered earlier, the dimension of articulation that precedes the full development into speech represented by the Tetragrammaton.<sup>56</sup> The progressively revealed cosmos begins its journey into perceptibility when it develops past the Voice and extends into the primal point of reality, the first articulate sound of the created universe. According to R. Asher, the breath [*ruah*] that courses through the dynamic of emanation is One and unified from its most primal essence to its most exoteric form. That breath merely sheds the layered masks of its concealment, transfiguring its appearance to the human mind. The Tetragrammaton, which represents the ontic totality of the sefirotic cosmos, reaches its fulfillment as an organism of speech, a Being whose life is symbolized by the sounds of metaphysical articulation.

Yet the progressive revelation of the cosmic Being from inward silence to fully articulated reality does not preclude epistemological limitations vis-à-vis the beginnings of that metaphysical speech. According to R. Asher, the obstructions to the human mind in mystical contemplation are equally insurmountable when the upper *sefirot* are the subject of its focus. No one, not even the celestial angels, is capable of penetrating through the dense veil of ontic concealment that enshrouds emerging reality as it is born of the Nothing.<sup>57</sup> Although R. Asher did claim that breath undergoes a process of progressive perceptibility as it moves beyond the Voice, he nonetheless conserves the elements of extreme esotericism and inscrutability, lest we think that the impenetrable mystery ends with the ontic emergence from *Keter*. Despite his insistence on an epistemic distinction

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the visual sparkling character of the cosmic Voice seems to be an original touch by R. Asher, in contrast to the emphasis on musical tones in R. Isaac's text.

56. The precise historical relationship of early Kabbalah to the '*Iyun* corpus has been much debated, with significant advances made by Mark Verman, *The Books of Contemplation: Medieval Jewish Mystical Sources* (Albany, N.Y., 1992). The conception of phonetic cosmogony is perhaps one of the greatest links between these two streams of early thirteenth-century Jewish mysticism, and the resemblances between the two renditions suggest a rather close affinity between the two schools. The '*Iyun* sources formulate both a phonetic conception of the divine metaphysic and the relation of the human prophetic mind to that unfolding Voice of the cosmos. What is more, we encounter a use of similar synesthetic images, representations in which the ocular nature of light and the audial nature of sound are conflated one with the other. The correlations there between the Tetragrammaton, the cosmic *alef*, and the Attributes resonate further with the thought of R. Asher ben David in striking ways. See Verman, *The Books of Contemplation*, 50, 60, 62.

57. See *R. Asher ben David*, 106–7.



between the primal Nothing and the cosmic Tetragrammaton, R. Asher retreats into a less radical apophatic perspective. In this view, the realm that is elusive to human consciousness seems to include all of the first five *sefirot*, a fact that R. Asher associates with the third letter of the Tetragrammaton:

The first *heh* . . . is counted in *Sefer yetzirah* as the second of the *sefirot* . . . In the Kabbalah, this *sefirah* is called ***Binah***, since She stands between (***Bein***) the two most supernal *sefirot* and the two that are below her [in the emanational hierarchy]. She stands in the middle. These five *sefirot* are [called] “inwardness” for a human being does not have the power to grasp them. Even to the prophet of prophets, even to Moses . . . [this impediment persists]. In *Sefer yetzirah* (1:3) it was said: “Ten *sefirot belimah*, the number of the ten fingers [of the hands], five against five.” From here you may learn that five of them are supernal . . . For this [supernal five] cannot be comprehended by any creature. She that is called *Binah* stands in the middle, in the point that lies between the four [other] points, the four directions. She stands at their center, and therefore She is alluded to by the [first] *heh* [of the Tetragrammaton]. Because She is not comprehensible [to the human mind], She was called [in *Sefer yetzirah* 1:10] “breath from breath” (*ruah meruah*). Just as breath has no shape or form, so too [*Binah*] has no shape or form.<sup>58</sup>

Here we encounter an extension of the *penimiyut* idea from the domain of *En-Sof* and *Keter* to all of the first five *sefirot*. Idel has linked this term to the “inner ten potencies” or “essences” that exist above or at the heart of the sefirotic structure.<sup>59</sup> In the context of that mythos, the realm of Infinity and Nothingness that precedes the birth of reality is depicted as the ultimate “inwardness” of the cosmos, the dimension of emanation that is most concealed from the human mind. In the text I have cited above, the inwardness of sefirotic Being is not limited to the “*sefirot* above (or within) the *sefirot*” but rather includes the upper half of the entire edifice. *Binah* stands at the center of this upper five, functioning as the median point of the highest two *sefirot* (*Keter* and *Hokhmah*) and the next two in the hierarchy (presumably *Hesed* and *Gevurah*). The model of exteriorization and self-revelation that we have examined so far is now lifted to a new plane: the sefirotic organism does not truly begin its descent into

58. Ibid., 107.

59. Moshe Idel, “The *Sefirot* above the *Sefirot*,” 239–80.

human perceptibility and ontological uncovering until halfway through the emanational decad. The symbolic correlation between *Binah* and the first *heh* of the Tetragrammaton is here primarily numerical, the *heh* pointing toward the sum of the first five *sefirot* whose center is the *sefirah Binah*. The realm of concealed inwardness in the metaphysical Being is thus represented by three letters: *alef*, *yod*, and *heh* (the *heh* being the axial center of the *alef* and the *yod*). In this sefirotic grouping, the dynamic of metaphysical speech outlined by R. Asher has not yet reached actualization. These elements of cosmic voice and sound, the first forms of the divine Name's structure, remain concealed in the interior life of Being. The fully articulated dimension of the cosmos, and, by extension, that which is cognizable to the human contemplative mind, will be symbolized by the second two letters of the Tetragrammaton. It is to this next phase in the self-revelation of divinity and the coming-into-speech of the cosmos that I now turn.

#### FROM THE CONCEALED TO THE REVEALED OF BEING

The third letter of the divine Tetragrammaton is conceived by R. Asher to be the cosmic channel for the outflow of the hidden dimensions of Being. *Vav* receives the impalpable force of the upper triad (*Keter*, *Hokhmah*, *Binah*) and transfigures the mystery of that essence into the body of the sefirotic structure. The *vav* becomes the medium of actualization and revelation in the divine life, whereby all that lies dormant and concealed may rise to the surface of perceivable reality.

And the *vav* in his great Name is an allusion to the six [primordial] directions . . . , and within [these directions] are six of the ten *sefirot*. These [six] are attributes [*midot*] of God, for through them he actualizes all the actions that are hidden *in potentia*. [They] bring him out of potentia and into actuality through his glorious power that holds them together and that has not ceased since the day that it arose in his Thought to create the world and never will.<sup>60</sup>

Throughout *Sefer ha-yihud*, R. Asher emphasizes that the *midot* are inextricable elements of the divine essence. In the passage above we see that these "attributes" are in fact modes of expression for the ineffable God, instruments of cosmic revelation. In good Aristotelian fashion, all reality that is to unfold in the dynamic of emanative Creation is already preexis-

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60. R. Asher ben David, 108.

tent in the potentia of divinity.<sup>61</sup> Through the cosmic channel represented by the letter *vav*, elusive and unformed energy is actualized, generating a process of uncovering all that was concealed in the primordial depths. As R. Asher continues:

To me it seems—according to the Kabbalah—that the five lights [*orot*] which are mentioned here<sup>62</sup> reflect the five supernal *sefirot* that are not perceivable. The “days” (*yamim*) [of Creation] which were mentioned in a different place reflect the five lower *sefirot*. It all is one entity as regards their essence, but their perceptibility [to the human mind] is not the same [*basagatam enah sbavab*]. [Their perceptibility] is all according to their proximity to their maker [or source]. The additional one that was included within the “six days” is the middle pillar [*kav ba-’emtza’i*], for [this pillar] is counted among the *sefirot* which are below the supernal five [*sefirot*], and [yet this pillar] is crowned [or encircled] with the inner Breath in the supernal [domain], and [this Breath] flows through the pillar without cessation. And every action that this pillar—who is [also called] the attribute of Compassion [*midat ba-rah’amim*]—acts, the inner force acts through it. This pillar is always called by the Special Name [*Shem ba-meyuḥad*] that is [also] called the Ineffable Name [*Shem ba-meforash*], for [God’s] actions are through [this pillar] . . .

And [this pillar] is like a vessel [or instrument] for the inner breath [*ruah ba-penimi*] that is called One. An example of this is [the way in which] the prophet is a vessel for the Holy Breath [or Spirit] that is with him when the [divine] Speech is with him. And this is so even if [the prophecy] is against the will [of the prophet]. As it is written in Jeremiah (20.9): “I thought, ‘I will not mention him, no more will I speak in his name’—but [his word] was like a raging fire in my heart, shut up in my bones; I could not hold it in, I was helpless.” David said (2 Sam 23.2): “The spirit of the Lord has spoken through me.” [This was also the case with] Moses our teacher, peace be unto him, master of all the prophets. As it is written (Num 12.8): “With him I speak mouth to mouth.” And also (Num 12.2): “Has the Lord spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us as well?” In none of these [cases] did it say, “He spoke to me” . . . Rather, the Breath [or

61. See Jonathan Barnes, ed., *The Complete Works of Aristotle* (Princeton, N.J., 1984), 1:518–21; 2:1583, 1633, 1700.

62. The reference here is to the first five repetitions of the word light (*or*) in the opening chapter of Genesis.

Spirit of divinity] is the speaker, and the prophet is like a vessel (*keli*) [for that Breath]. [This being so,] how much more so [with respect to] that middle pillar, which is like a vessel for the inner Breath that flows through it constantly and without cessation. For this reason [the pillar] was called by the Special Name, and the inner Breath that is within it was alluded to when [Scripture] stated, “day one,” as I have explained [already].<sup>63</sup>

As we saw earlier, the upper five *sefirot* represent the dimension of reality concealed from the human cognitive mind. Only with the transition into the lower (or more external) half of the sefirotic hierarchy does the emanative cosmos open up to the mystic’s contemplation. In the text above, R. Asher depicts the transitional border between the hidden and the revealed as “the middle pillar,” the Hebrew letter *vav* which brings the *potentia* of Being into actualization. This pillar is technically a member of the lower sefirotic grouping but seems to extend the uppermost part of its self into the supernal realm. According to R. Asher, that pillar is crowned by the inner Breath which derives from the most mysterious of all cosmic places. As such, the pillar of *vav* receives the amorphous life-breath of cosmic Being and transfigures that vocal wind into the beginnings of creative speech—the formal representation of which is the four-letter divine Name, an appellation that is ascribed to the pillar of sefirotic flow because of its generative force. The symbolic associations here are not particularly surprising; the letter *vav* of the Tetragrammaton is a typical referent to the *sefirah Tiferet*, the dimension that includes the middle six *sefirot* (the numerical value of the Hebrew letter) within itself.

This text remarkably conflates cosmic and human images to convey the dynamic of emanative articulation. Enlisting a series of biblical proof-texts to illustrate his point, R. Asher likens the role of the middle pillar to the role of the human prophet, who also becomes a vessel for the flow of divine speech.<sup>64</sup> Irrespective of his desire or willingness to do so, the prophet receives the influx of vocal energy from the divine source and becomes the mouthpiece of the cosmic Breath. In R. Asher’s estimation, the experience of prophecy is no mutual dialogue between prophet and deity, but rather the former undergoes an experience that is thoroughly beyond his control and can do nothing but serve as the channel for the

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63. *R. Asher ben Davīd*, 109.

64. This subject has been explored in great depth by Pedaya, “‘Possessed by Speech,’” 565–636.

divine phonetic winds.<sup>65</sup> This model of human ecstatic experience is provided by R. Asher as a concrete metaphor for the dialectic of intradivine life and unfolding. Just as the human prophet has no control over the influx of divine breath into his body and/or voice, so too the middle pillar of the sefirotic structure, represented by the *vav* of the Tetragrammaton, must serve as the channel for the unformed Breath of emanative speech. Both the dynamics of human ecstatic speech and that of cosmic vocalization embody a process of movement from the undefined to the palpable. We see in the *vav* the beginning of a process which I have traced throughout this essay: the emergence of the cosmos from silence to ordered sound, the process by which the hidden deity becomes manifest, an unbroken flow of life *within the divine self*.

The *vav* of the divine Name represents the middle body of the sefirotic anthropos, corresponding to the central pillar of cosmic-divine Being. It alludes to the dynamic uncovering of divinity, propelling the emanation toward the revealed domain of human consciousness. Yet the vocalizing-articulative force of the middle pillar (representing the six *sefirot* that follow the upper triad) is not complete until it has been filtered through the portal of the tenth *sefirah*. Human consciousness must necessarily pass through the gates of the lowest *sefirah* in its quest for cognition of the divine mysteries. The individual's mystical experience cannot directly access the energies contained within the middle pillar but must rather engage the final rung in the emanative drama, the domain of the *Shekbinah*. This *sefirah* was also commonly referred to as "the Presence" (*Kavod*), which denotes the indwelling of the divine Being in the human realm. For early kabbalists, and for R. Asher in particular, this *sefirah*, which is represented by the final letter of the Tetragrammaton, is the sensual locus for contemplative experience, sometimes described as the light most perceptible to the human mind while exercising visionary techniques, and other times as the dimension of fully articulated divine speech. With respect to light symbolism and visionary experience, the *kavod* is called the tenth "speculum," that which does not shine. This lowest of rungs is only the passive receiver of emanative light and is the illumination most dimmed by its relative distance from the source of all cosmic light.

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65. On this question, see Michael Fishbane, "Biblical Prophecy as a Religious Phenomenon," in *Jewish Spirituality I: From the Bible through the Middle Ages*, ed. A. Green (New York, 1986), 62–81. In his analysis, Fishbane examines some of the very verses that are central to R. Asher's mystical claims, demonstrating that the biblical prophets conceived of their prophecy as a personal, spiritual ordeal in addition to the larger sociopolitical ramifications of the prophecy itself.

Human mystical visions of the upper worlds are always mediated through the dim reflection of that tenth lens.<sup>66</sup> Concerning the metaphor of vocalization, the *Shekbinab* is depicted as the audial channel for supernal speech, the opening through which the words become inscribed into the prophet's very being. Prophecy for the kabbalists, as we have seen, is the experience of being completely overwhelmed by the divine Word; an act of speech mediated through the *Shekbinab/Kavod*, which is heard in the depths of the mystic's physical self. The organism of Divinity, unfolding from the infinite silence and potentiality of cosmic breath, finally becomes articulate in the prophet's inner chambers. Turning now back to R. Asher's *Commentary*, we notice how closely the *Kavod* is associated with the realization of divine sound and speech:

The Presence (*Kavod*) was alluded to in the Torah (Ex 3.15): "This shall be my name forever, this my appellation for all eternity." The meaning of "this shall be my name" is the first three letters [of the Tetragrammaton] that are called "His Great Name" (*shemo ha-gadol*). And "this my appellation" [is represented by] the second *heh* [of the Tetragrammaton], which is an allusion to the Presence . . . The Presence was already clarified in the Torah, as it was called by the Ineffable Name (*Shem ha-meforash*). [It is written] (Ex 16.10): "There, in a cloud, appeared the presence (*kavod*) of YHVH." Immediately [following this statement], Scripture says (Ex 16.11): "And YHVH spoke (*va-yedaber*)." Also [Ex 16.28]: "And YHVH said (*va-y'omer*)." We have found that the *Kavod* is alluded to in the [image of the] cloud alone, and [in each textual instance], after [mention of the *Kavod*], Scripture mentions the Ineffable Name (*Shem ha-meforash*) and its speech (*ḏiburo u-ma 'amaro*). Thus it is written (Ex 33.9): "And when Moses entered the Tent, the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the Tent, while he spoke with Moses." And after this, Scripture states (Ex 33.11): "The Lord would speak to Moses face to face, as one man speaks to another." In the majority of cases, Scripture mentions [something like] (Ex 16.10): "There, in a cloud, appeared the presence (*kavod*) of YHVH," and afterward, Scripture mentions the [act of]

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66. See Elliot Wolfson *Through a Speculum That Shines*. Wolfson also includes a long discussion of the role of light in mystical experience in general and Jewish mysticism in particular, centering upon the ontological status of light in mystical discourse, as well as the use of light to depict the textures of human religious ecstasy. Examples of R. Asher's opinion that the *Shekbinab* is the visible dimension of divinity that may be viewed by the human mystic can be found in *R. Asher ben David*, 113–15.

speech through the Ineffable Name [YHVH] . . . There is no doubt that the *kavod* is the *Shekbinah*, for it is her way to be visible in the [pillar of] cloud, as the *Shekbinah* dwelled in the Tabernacle. As it is said (Ex 40.34): “The cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the presence of YHVH filled the Tabernacle” . . . The *Shekbinah* and the Presence are one entity, and that is the Attribute of Judgment.<sup>67</sup>

This text takes the final step in the drama of cosmic articulation. After the mysterious unknowability of the supernal Nothing is transfigured and vocalized in the *vav*, the last *heb* of the divine Name lifts the cosmic Being into audible speech. With the appearance of the *Shekbinah* or *Kavod*, the Tetragrammaton is brought to completion. Only once the dimension of the *Shekbinah* has become present to the prophet can human ears hear the subtle energies of the divine Being in the form of articulate speech. This moment is the ultimate uncovering of cosmic Being, a channeling of impalpable reality into the funnel of a spoken voice. The final *heb* of the Tetragrammaton represents the culmination of an intradivine dynamic of revelation, the last stage in the descent of divinity toward the human mind. This is the great role of the tenth *sefirah*. It stands on the liminal border of dimensions within Being, announcing its presence to the worthy prophet through the articulate sounds of a divine voice. In the human encounter with the *Shekbinah*, cosmic Being has lifted the masks of its layered concealment and has entered fully into the revealed domain of perception. In the closure of the four-letter Name, the mysterious inwardness of primordality rises to the surface of mystical consciousness, and the Word of God is made, at long last, audible to human ears.

REVERBERATIONS IN CONTEXT: R. AZRIEL OF  
GERONA AND R. MOSES BEN NAHMAN

Having examined this theological and prophetic motif as it appears in the thought of R. Asher ben David, I now turn (albeit with greater brevity) to selected parallels in the early kabbalistic literature. The writings of two Spanish mystics are of particular significance in this regard: those composed by R. Azriel of Gerona and R. Moses ben Nahman (also known as Nahmanides). Both kabbalists of major influence in the history of Jewish mysticism, R. Azriel and the Ramban embody the growth and transformation of kabbalistic thought beyond the limits of its Provençal literary origins. In shifting our gaze to these two giants of the early Kabbalah, I intend to show the range with which phonetic and audial mysti-

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67. *R. Asher ben David*, 115.

cism was integrated into the metaphysical ruminations of this formative period, as well as to further underscore the manner in which such thinking was tied to exegesis of *Sefer yetzirah*. For if *Sefer yetzirah* was deemed to be one of the crucial foundations for early kabbalistic thinking, we may understand why this particular cluster of motifs came to mark the character of sources indebted to the disciple circle of Isaac the Blind. What is more, the case of Nahmanides indicates that such conceptions of cosmology and religious experience were simultaneously active in the thought of a parallel, albeit related circle of early Kabbalah.<sup>68</sup> Our first example is drawn from Azriel of Gerona's *Commentary to Sefer yetzirah*:<sup>69</sup>

**Voice, Breath, and Speech.** After mentioning that the first *sefirah* is called *ruah*, he (the author of *Sefer yetzirah*) said that very *ruah* contains three voices (*kolot*) within it: the *ruah* that is called voice (*kol*), its middle, which lengthens and proceeds and is called *ruah*, and the breaking up of its parts, divided into letters, which is called 'speech' (*ḏibur*). Thus, according to the way he (the author of *Sefer yetzirah*) interprets the matter, even the voice (*kol*), and even the speech (*ḏibur*) are called *ruah*. And this is the Holy Spirit (*ruah ha-kodesh*). For the holiness (*ha-kodesh*) is the force (*ba-koah*) of *Rom* (a cognomen for the first *sefirah*, *Keter*) that receives from *En-Sof*. And it is from there that the *ruah* derives, that which is called *ruah ha-kodesh*, from which come the holy letters and the holy language.

Here, too, the image of *ruah* represents the unbroken stream of divine efflux—a flow of energy that stems directly from the wellsprings of *En-Sof*, ultimately morphing into the human prophetic state. The ontological and the epistemological are organically bound—that which manifests as prophetic inspiration in the human world is inseparable from a texture of Being, a pulse of divine lifeblood, an overflow of supernal water from the Source. And the final result of that ontic stream is the sacred language; the Hebrew letters and the Hebrew words are but extensions of the textuality and linguistic fabric of Divinity itself. As was the case, more or less, in the formulation of Asher ben David, the Word of God is nothing less than the great unified chain of cosmic Being—what begins in *ruah*, deep

68. To be sure, among sources beyond the diachronic scope of this study, the zoharic corpus also developed this theme with its characteristic creativity and lyrical power. See the consideration in Charles Mopsik, "Pensée, voix, et parole dans le Zohar," *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions* 213 (1996): 385–414.

69. See the text published under spurious attribution to Nahmanides in C. Chavel, ed., *Kiṭve Ramban* (Jerusalem, 1964), 2:456.



within the infinite concealment of *En-Sof*, cannot but end up as the sacred language of prophecy spoken by the human being in the lower world. Divinity is the mystery of the sacred Word-in-process, the vocalization of Being whose texture is realized in the speech of the prophet. The life of Divinity is a cosmic dynamic in which all manifestations are outward reverberations of the deep structure and unity of sacred breath, of holy spirit. In shaping the idea in this way, Azriel underscores the ontological nature of the Hebrew language; indeed, the *lashon ha-kodesh* is nothing less than an extension and manifestation of the divine life-force, an earthly resonance of the fundamentally *textual* identity of Divinity.<sup>70</sup>

Compare Azriel's commentary to that of Nahmanides on the same lines from *Sefer yetzirah*:

(SY 1:9) **'Ten sefirot belimab. One: The breath of the Living God** (*ruah elohim hayim*), **blessed be the name of the Life of the Worlds.'** The name is the essence of the thing, and it connotes something subtle and inward that has no body (*lashon dak u-fenimi she-'eno guf*). (SY 1:9) **'Voice, Breath, and Speech** (*kol ve-ruah ve-dibur*)—**that is the Holy Spirit** (*ve-zebu ruah ha-kodesh*).' This is to say that there is no entity that does not have a voice, just like the voice that is heard in the breaking of the air—and breath is within it (*kmo ha-kol ha-nishma' be-defikat be-'avir ve-ruah yesh bo*). For it is that which breaks through and reaches the hearing ear; it is that which forms the idea [in the hearer's mind]. These three things exist in great subtlety in the first *sefirah*, and that is the Holy Spirit (*ve-zebu ruah ha-kodesh*). That is to say: Just like the spiritbreath of a person (*ruah ha-'adam*), which is the soul within the body (*she-bi' neshamah betokh ha-guf*), so too the Spirit is in the Holy (*kakh ha-ruah ha-kodesh*), and the "Holy" is *Hokhmah*. And because of the unfolding of things, prophecy is called "the Holy Spirit"—even though prophecy does not reach that high.<sup>71</sup>

We should first note the degree to which this mode of kabbalistic discourse differs from Nahmanides' more well-known writings, particularly

70. Once again I refer the reader to the recent scholarship of Elliot Wolfson, in which human embodiment in the lower world is inextricably bound up in the sacred textuality of the divine self. See the representative formulation in Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 242–60, esp. 255.

71. See the critical edition of this text edited by Gershom Scholem, "The Authentic Commentary of Nahmanides to *Sefer yetzirah* and Other Kabbalistic Writings Attributed to Him," reprinted in J. Ben-Shlomo and M. Idel, eds., *Mehkare kabalab* (Hebrew; Tel Aviv, 1998), 95.

the immensely popular and influential *Perush 'al ha-Torah*. Indeed, were it not for the detailed philological analyses of Gershom Scholem, we would not even suspect that Nahmanides could possibly be the author.<sup>72</sup> As was the case in the texts cited above from Azriel of Gerona and Asher ben David, the prophetic experience of the Holy Spirit is here represented as inseparable from the dynamic processes of the divine world. The Holy Spirit, or Holy Breath, flows downward from the uppermost reaches of divine reality and finally ends in the prophecy of a human being.<sup>73</sup> According to Nahmanides, the prophet participates intimately in the flow of emanative energy; he becomes the receiver of the Holy Breath that has originated in the domain of the highest *sefirah*. The “Holy Spirit,” a classical reference to prophetic experience, thus assumes a hypostatic nature in the sefirotic realm. The phrase is hermeneutically divided to represent a dynamic relationship between the two first *sefirot*. The word “Holy” is identified with *Hokhmah*, and the Spirit/Breath is associated with the force that flows into *Hokhmah*—a clear invocation of the *sefirah Keter* as it too receives from *En-Sof*. As such, the term *ruah ba-kodesh* is not understood literally as Holy Spirit but rather as the Spirit which animates the domain of “Holy.” The breath of divine energy fills this sefirotic dimension as the soul fills and vivifies the physical body—a metaphysical conception that should certainly be read alongside the passage by Azriel cited above. R. Azriel too hypostasizes the term “Holy Spirit,” conceiving of prophecy in metaphysical terms. For Nahmanides as well, the verbal experience of prophecy is not simply the hearing of an external divine speech but rather the ultimate manifestation of a process with seeds in the origins of Being. As in our earlier texts, the deity is itself *identical* with the living movement of breath and speech as it courses through the cosmos. For Nahmanides it is also clear that the moment of prophetic audition stimulates a cognitive and imaginative process in the mind of the prophet. The Breath of divine ontology reaches the “hearing ear” of the human being, and it is that very hearing which forms thought and idea in the mind. As is the case with descriptions of mystical vision, the sense datum of prophecy is inextricably linked to an epistemological

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72. See G. Scholem, “The Authentic Commentary of Nahmanides to *Sefer yetzirah*,” 67–111. Through an analysis of philological and conceptual criteria, Scholem demonstrated that the commentary to *Sefer yetzirah* traditionally attributed to Nahmanides was authored instead by R. Azriel of Gerona, and that Nahmanides had in fact written a separate commentary to the book. This authentic commentary was published with critical annotation by Scholem in the same article.

73. I remind the reader here of the related analysis in H. Pedaya, “‘Possessed by Speech,’” 580–91.

process.<sup>74</sup> The experience of God through the medium of the auditory sense becomes the channel for meaning as it is constructed in consciousness.<sup>75</sup>

The topos represented by this text is indeed rare in the writings of Nahmanides. His exposition of abstract kabbalistic matters is often far more muted and obscure. Yet it seems proper to view the aforementioned evidence as the metaphysical premise behind Nahmanides' other discussions on mystical hearing and prophecy. Despite the fact that the majority of his other elaborations on auditory mysticism do not explicate the intersection of cosmogony and experience, the *Commentary to Sefer yetzirah* reveals Nahmanides' theoretical position when not bounded by the concerns of an exoteric work. Nahmanides clearly did not deem his *Commentary on the Torah* to be the proper venue for such explicit kabbalistic cosmogony, but he nevertheless shared the metaphysical presuppositions of his contemporaries and saw the prophetic moment of hearing as the result of a dynamic emanatory event within God. We may notice a trace of this premise in Nahmanides' commentary to Genesis 3.8.<sup>76</sup> Interpreting the scriptural remark "they heard the voice of God moving about the garden at the breezy

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74. Elliot Wolfson has argued that the experience of mystical vision functions in a decidedly hermeneutical manner, insofar as the sense datum of sight must be interpretively integrated into consciousness through the textual and symbolic framework of the given tradition. By his own admission, Wolfson has followed the epistemological assumptions made by several modern philosophers of phenomenology, including Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. See E. R. Wolfson, *Through a Speculum That Shines*, 52–73, 326–32, 355–57.

75. Most recently, Moshe Halbertal has studied the range of revelatory and prophetic topoi in the thought of Nahmanides, with special attention to the centrality of the *Shekbinah* in the Ramban's conception of prophetic access and experience, as well as the master's reflections on visualization as the summit of the prophetic path. See Halbertal, *Al derekh ha-'emet: Ha-Ramban ve-yetsiratah shel masoret* (Jerusalem, 2006), 181–211. With particular regard to the themes of the present inquiry, Halbertal makes two points of interest to us: (1) the prophetic revelation of the divine voice functions as a symbolic allusion to the different ways in which individual prophets (according to their stature and ability) may access the varied dimensions of divine reality (p. 193); and (2) that the voice of divine revelation is to be understood as but the first level in prophetic attainment—that this state is followed ultimately by an ocular experience of divinity, one in which "the heavens are opened to him, and he sees divine visions" (210). With respect to the centrality of the *Shekbinah* in the process of prophetic vision (and the manner in which the *Shekbinah* was believed by Nahmanides to become manifest through angelic garb and presence), see Elliot R. Wolfson, "The Secret of the Garment in Nahmanides," *Da 'at* 24 (1990): xxv–lxix.

76. C. Chavel, ed., *Perush ha-Ramban al ha-Torah* (Jerusalem, 1960), 1:50.

time of day (*mitbalekb ba-gan le-ruah ba-yom*),” Nahmanides claims that such a formulation implies the occurrence of a revelatory event, a disclosure of Divinity (*gilui shekbinab*). The use of the term *mitbalekb* (moving/walking about) is understood as a depiction of divine indwelling in the human domain, and its conjunction with the word *kol* implies an auditory indwelling, or a revelation of the divine voice. What Nahmanides concludes next, however, clues us in to the cosmogonic assumptions behind his remarks. Instead of reading the phrase *le-ruah ba-yom* as a reference to a particular time of day, a rendition which seems to be the literal meaning of the biblical text, our author moves to assert that the presence of *ruah* is an inextricable feature of divine revelation (presumably of the auditory sort). He states: “The reason [for the phrase] *le-ruah ba-yom* is that when the *Shekbinab* is revealed, a strong and mighty wind comes. As it is written (1 Kgs 19.11): ‘And lo, the Lord passed by. There was a great and mighty wind, splitting mountains and shattering rocks by the power of the Lord.’” The correlation between revelation and *ruah* is thus justified by scriptural proof-text, but we must not forget that Nahmanides’ insertion of this comment arises specifically in the context of reflection upon the indwelling divine voice (*kol*). The interweaving of these two technical cosmogonic terms (*ruah* and *kol*) in a revelatory framework necessitates association with *Sefer yetzirah* exegesis, particularly when we know that Nahmanides made this connection explicit and central in his own *Commentary to Sefer yetzirah*.

As is reflected in the biblical text itself, the divine voice was understood to manifest an overwhelming power, a fearsome force when present in the natural world. Indeed, in his *Perush ‘al ha-Torah*, Nahmanides repeatedly emphasizes the Israelites’ fear of death from the divine voice.<sup>77</sup> He adds new layers of psychological complexity and insight, himself asserting that supernatural sound is infused with an overwhelming and dangerous character. There is, however, one startling piece of evidence in Nahmanides’ *Perush* in which this clash between orders of Being is articulated through the use of classic mystical tropes of unification and transcendence of the physical. The fragment to which I am referring is found in his commentary to Dt 5.23 and is a reflection upon the following scriptural line: “What mortal ever heard the voice of the living God (*kol elohim hayim*) speak out of the fire, as we did, and lived?” Nahmanides concludes that

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77. *Ibid.*, 1:405 (on Ex 20.15–16); 1:449 (on Ex 24.3). For an additional discussion by Nahmanides on the particular power of the divine voice, consult his commentary to Deuteronomy 5.19 (*ibid.*, 2:368). Compare this with Nahmanides’ commentary to Dt 4.32 (*ibid.*, 2:364–65).

this verse implies that “one who hears the voice of God, with whom is the source of life (*she-’uno makor ha-ḥayim*), his soul will cleave to its foundation (*tedabek nafsho biysoḏab*), and he will no longer live a physical life (*ve-lo’ tiḥeyeb ‘od ḥaye besarim*).”<sup>78</sup> This remarkable formulation, though quite terse and concise, sets Nahmanides’ other remarks into sharp relief. Metaphysical reality, here represented by the divine voice, is utterly incompatible with the physical senses of natural reality. Implicit in Nahmanides’ statement is the notion that the physical body (or ears) of the human being cannot tolerate the intensity and power of God’s speech.<sup>79</sup> An experience of that exalted sound in the earthly realm has the inevitable result of death, for the physical body is unable to remain physical once it has encountered the overpowering and wholly spiritual grandeur of heavenly articulation. Given this fact, we can now understand with much greater clarity why Nahmanides dwelled upon and emphasized the deep fear of death experienced by the people at the prospect of hearing that very voice. It was only because of the unique Sinaitic miracle that the event could be tolerated to the extent that it was.

Yet despite the fact that the Israelites consider the divine voice to be a precarious force, and that Nahmanides represents their emotion as one of dread at the thought of death by auditory experience, his own comments to Dt 5.23 cast the issue in a dramatically different light. The death that will theoretically ensue from an auditory experience of the divine voice is characterized by Nahmanides as one of *devekut*, a technical kabbalistic term for ecstatic union of the human being with the Deity.<sup>80</sup> The

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78. *Ibid.*, 2:369.

79. There is interesting precedent for this theme in classical Jewish sources. In their mythic reconstruction of the Sinai revelation, the rabbis claimed that the souls of the Israelites departed after hearing the sound of this first divine utterance, and it was therefore necessary for God to resurrect them so that they could hear the remaining commandments. See bShab 88b, and Michael Fishbane, *The Kiss of God: Spiritual and Mystical Death in Judaism* (Seattle, 1994), 16.

80. See the more extended examination of Nahmanides’ conception of *devekut* in Jonathan Feldman, “The Power of the Soul over the Body: Corporeal Transformation and Attitudes towards the Body in the Thought of Nahmanides” (Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 1999), 219–44, particularly 230–32. On the other hand, Moshe Idel has somewhat minimized the significance of *devekut* for Nahmanides in contradistinction to the centrality of this theme in the thought of the Geronese kabbalists. See Idel, “Nahmanides: Kabbalah, Halakhah, and Spiritual Leadership,” in *Jewish Mystical Leaders and Leadership in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century*, ed. M. Idel and M. Ostow (Northvale, N.J., 1998), 74–75. For a more elaborate discussion of this topic in the history of Jewish mysticism, as well as an argument for the connection between *devekut* and *unio mystica* in Jewish thought, see Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, 35–73.

phrasing that is chosen by Nahmanides to characterize this phenomenon is indeed highly revealing. The moment of mystical hearing is depicted not as a dreaded event in which the individual is robbed of his desired earthly existence (which does seem to be the concern of the Israelites) but rather a blissful event of religious ecstasy, the ideal of all mystical striving.<sup>81</sup> The entrance of divine sound into the realm of natural human hearing is enough to lift the person from the bounds of physical life and to reunite his soul with its eternal source and foundation. The expression *tedabek nafsbo biysodab* indicates that Nahmanides viewed auditory revelation as an ideal phenomenon of the utmost power and mystical effect. The hearer of God's voice will attain the goal that lies at the heart of the kabbalistic enterprise: the ecstatic reunion of the human soul with its divine root.

In conclusion, this study has sought to sketch the contours of a theological motif in early kabbalistic discourse—a conception of the nature and structure of Being in which Divinity is represented as a cosmic act of articulation, a metaphysical progression of breath into sound. As such, the ontology of Divinity is most fully realized through its manifestation to the human ear in prophetic experience; that which was most hidden and most amorphous is channeled into the definite and particular forms of sound, speech, and language. Understood in this manner, the cosmos is alive with the breath of God, brimming with the speech of Divinity; the textual nature of reality is an extension of the divine being as sacred Word. Building upon the rhetoric of *Sefer yetzirah*, these kabbalists constructed a mythos of emanation in which the *sefirot* of God are considered to be a phonetic process and a dynamic of self-revelation. And as we have seen with regard to Nahmanides, the divine speech approaches the kabbalist as the *mysterium tremendum*—at once with the allure of revelation and the terror of ultimate danger.

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81. This mystical ideal of ecstatic death through the encounter of the physical human with the metaphysical deity is often characterized in Jewish literature as fulfillment in the love of God. As with the aural experience of the deity, the divine kiss also effects the end of natural life and the commencement of supernatural union. See Michael Fishbane, *The Kiss of God*, 14–50.