

## ***“Everything Is In It”: Rabbinic Interpretation and Modern Literary Theory***

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First I thought I was a writer. Then I realized I was a Jew. Then I no longer distinguished the writer in me from the Jew because one and the other are only torments of an ancient word.

— Edmond Jabès

Ben Bag Bag said: Turn it [the Torah] and turn it over again, for everything is in it; and look deeply into it, grow old and grey over it, and do not stir from it, for you have no better portion than this.

— Pirke Avot (*Sayings of the Fathers*) 5:21

BETWEEN BEN BAG BAG AND EDMOND Jabès, the contemporary French-Jewish poet, lie two thousand years of Jewish history, Jewish commentary, and Jewish questioning. Ben Bag Bag's advice expresses the classic rabbinic view of Torah; Edmond Jabès' writings are filled with the torment of the modern Jew seeking a way back to the ancient sources. Ben Bag Bag seems to share none of this anguish, but the sage uses an unusual verb in his statement: *hafokh*, to “turn.” One might have expected him to say instead: “Learn it and learn it,” or “Study and repeat it,” and use the verb *l'mod*. His choice of the verb *hafokh*, I would argue, is a key to the extraordinary nature of rabbinic interpretation, to the profound ways that the rabbis opened and transformed the text of Scripture, and so created and preserved Judaism as we know it. I want to examine here some ways in which recent literary theory might help us understand what was so extraordinary about the rabbis and their interpretive genius, especially in midrash. And I want to pose the question: How does their turning and opening the Book relate to the ways in which language and texts are turned and opened in modern literary theory?

The ancient rabbis do, indeed, turn Scripture — not only as one might turn a jewel to view the way light is reflected from its different sides, but they turn it over on itself, upset its linear narrative order in seemingly outrageous ways. A classic and well-known example is the commentary on the first verse of the Bible in the midrash collection *Bereshit Rabbah*.

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R. Oshaya commenced thus: "Then I was by Him as a nursling (*amon*); and I was daily all delight" (Prov. 8:30). *Amon* means tutor; *amon* means covered; *amon* means hidden; and some say *amon* means great. *Amon* is a tutor as you read, "As an *omen* (nursing-father) carries the sucking child" (Num. 11:12). *Amon* means covered, as in the verse "*Ha-emunim* (they that were clad, i.e., covered) in scarlet" (Lam. 4:5). *Amon* means hidden, as in the verse, "And he concealed (*omen*) Hadassah" (Esther 2:7). *Amon* means great, as in the verse, "Art thou better than No-Amon?" (Neh. 3:8), which is rendered, "Art thou better than Alexandria the Great that is situated among the rivers?" Another interpretation: *amon* is a workman (*uman*). The Torah declares: "I was the working tool of the Holy One Blessed be He." In human practice, when a mortal king builds a palace, he builds it not with his own skill but with the skill of an architect. The architect, moreover, does not build it out of his head, but employs plans and diagrams to know how to arrange the chambers and the doors. Thus God consulted the Torah and created the world, while the Torah declares, "In the beginning God created," referring to the Torah, as in the verse, "The Lord made me as the beginning of His way" (Prov. 8:22)

The acontextual interpretation builds on the word play of *amon/uman* — nursling/workman and identifies the speaker of Proverbs as the Torah itself personified. The Torah proclaims that it was the workman/nursling of God, that is, God's instrument in creating the world, and not a simple set of narratives about events or prescriptive laws. God created "in the beginning," means *in/with* the Torah (now identified with the word "beginning") which pre-existed creation. It was with God, tutored, covered, hidden. The hiddenness of Torah, though, remains even after the Sinaitic revelation which Moses transcribed into writing; it is that divine, creative force within the words and letters opening them to a plenitude of meaning, encompassing all reality and knowing: "everything is in it." Thus Torah gives birth to, and includes, rabbinic interpretation in the Talmud, midrash, legal writings, and so forth. The question, however, is why are such ideas and claims derived in such a seemingly awkward, indirect way, through puns, "misreading," through turning and twisting language and context?

In literary terminology, turns of language are called "tropes," from the Greek word *tropus* also meaning "turn" and, consequently, "manner, style, the figurative use of a word, a figure of speech or embellishment." Some literary theorists have argued that what distinguishes literature from other forms of verbal communication is precisely that it is a language of tropes, a figurative language where words themselves are foregrounded rather than receding in the face of their objects as in practical communication or ordinary, non-literary language. Another strong trend in recent literary criticism, deconstruction, has focused on the rhetorical aspects of language and maintained that tropes are not "mere" figures of speech such as metaphor, metonymy, or ellipsis — simple additions or ornaments; rather, they emanate from the very generative power



of language itself. Ordinary, "literal" language, thus, is a special kind of troping, not vice versa.<sup>1</sup>

Turning, moreover, implies movement, change, and the question since Nietzsche, Freud and the modern development of what Paul Ricoeur has called the "hermeneutics of suspicion" becomes: What desire, will, power are behind tropes? Turns, that is, are not always innocent. Literary schools such as the Russian Formalists saw literary troping as a kind of violation, or deformation of conventional language.<sup>2</sup> How, then, do turns relate to transgressions of accepted meaning? Jacques Lacan, the late French psychoanalyst, reinterpreted what Freud taught us about the nature of the unconscious and emphasized that "the unconscious is structured like a *language*" (italics mine).<sup>3</sup> Dreams, for instance, are a language of deformation, displacement, strange turns of images and words generated from the twists of frustrated and frustrating desire. One turns to get around something.

In one sense, midrash represents a turning of Scripture over on itself to get around the historical problem of closure of the biblical canon. With the political upheavals and disasters caused by the wars with Rome in the first century, there was an urgent need finally to fix and organize canons and traditions. With the closure of canon, the oracular voice of God no longer speaks directly; prophecy is past. But moments of closing at the same time generate new modes of opening, opening by turning: the only way back or into Scripture is the way around. And, in midrash, Scripture becomes a maze of twists and turns.

Turning is also a turning back to God after one has been distant, or when the original meaning of a text has become alien. The rabbis were able to reopen the text, make it speak and have meaning after closure and catastrophe; our generation, too, has suffered closure and rupture — the closure of an era of Jewish life and belief after the Enlightenment and assimilation of Jewry into the secular world, and, of course, the catastrophe of the Holocaust. We want and need to know as well, how to reopen the Book, how to make it speak, how to hear the voice in the silence.

1. Some good introductions to deconstructive and post-structuralist literary theory are as follows: Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice* (New York: Methuen, 1982); Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1982); John Sturrock, *Structuralism and Since* (New York: Oxford, 1979); Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1983); Ann Jefferson and David Robey, *Modern Literary Theory: A Comparative Introduction* (N.Y.: Barnes & Noble, 1982).

2. The best account of Russian Formalism is Victor Erlich's *Russian Formalism: History-Doctrine* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1981).

3. See Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits: A Selection* (New York: Norton, 1977). For explanations of Lacan, see John Muller and William Richardson, *Lacan Interpreted* (New York: International Universities Press, 1981) and Stuart Schneiderman, *Jacques Lacan: The Death of an Intellectual Hero* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1983).

## II

Theorists of hermeneutics (the science of interpretation) often say that the problem of how to open the text is the condition of *all* interpretation.<sup>4</sup> Yet, the rabbis had distinctive modes of exegesis stemming from a particular relation to language. Moreover, they asserted that their commentaries had a most special position: "Even that which a brilliant student will some day expound in front of his teacher — even that was already given at Sinai" (Jer. *Peah* 6:2). That is, the rabbis' own interpretations, additions, turns and twists of language are part of, enfolded within, the divine revelation itself. This statement is not simply their attempt to legitimate and authorize their own interpretations; it also reflects, I would argue, profound insight into the nature of language and interpretation.

For the rabbis, in trying to come to terms with certain closures, with a distancing of the divine voice, a concealment of God in history, respond by saying that if you turn it and turn it, you will find that, too — concealment, indeterminacy — is already in the text. Where? In the very gaps and ambiguities of the divine language; and there, too, is the space of their own interpretations. So they turn the loss of center, the Temple, the cult back into Scripture itself — fold it over to enclose the loss of meaning into the text and, in doing so, they paradoxically make the text meaningful again. David Roskies describes a kind of rabbinic "sacred parody" or "counter-commentary" used to cope with anguish, and cites the following midrash:<sup>5</sup>

"Who is a mighty one like you, O Lord" (Ps. 89:9) [Rather one should proclaim]: "Who is like you, mighty in self-restraint?" You heard the blasphemy and insults of that wicked man [Titus] but you kept silent! In the school of Rabbi Ishmael it was taught: "Who is like you, O Lord, among the mighty (*elim*) (Exod. 15:11)? [Read rather] "Who is like you among the mute" (*illimim*) — since He sees the suffering of His children and remains silent!" (B. *Gittin* 56b; *Mekhila* 42b).

In a perceptive essay on midrash,<sup>6</sup> James Kugel cites another extraordinary example. The rabbis are trying to explain why it is that in the alphabetical acrostic Psalm 145, where each line begins with a new letter of the Hebrew alphabet, there is no verse which begins with the letter *nun* ("N").

Why is there no *nun* verse in Psalm 145? Rabbi Yochanan explained that it is because Israel's (as it were) downfall begins with that letter, as it is written, "She-has-fallen (*nafelah*) and will no more rise, the virgin of Israel" (Amos 5:2). But in the West (i.e., Palestine) the sages resolve [the problematic mes-

4. For introductions to hermeneutics see David Couzens Hoy, *The Critical Circle: Literature, History, and Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1982), Roy Howard, *Three Faces of Hermeneutics* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1982) and Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1976).

5. David Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1984), pp. 30-31, 19-20.

6. James Kugel, "Two Introductions to Midrash," *Prooftexts*, 3 (1983): 131-133.



sage of that verse by dividing it up differently] thus: "She has fallen and will (fall) no more; rise, O virgin of Israel!" Rabbi Nahman bar Isaac said: [Though David omitted the *nun*-verse because it would have invoked Israel's downfall,] nevertheless David reconsidered and, in divine inspiration, added the next verse, "The Lord lifts up (*somekh*) all who are fallen, and straightens up all who are bent" (B. Ber. 4b).

That is, King David, the traditional author of the Psalms, somehow foresaw that, centuries later, the prophet Amos would write the terrible prophecy of the fall of Israel which would begin with the letter *nun* in the word *nafelah* ("she-has-fallen"), and so avoided using that letter. Instead, he added the very next verse which begins with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet, *somekh* ("S") and reads, "The Lord supports all who fall," as if David then foretold that God would lift Israel from its fall, and restore her. Moreover, the rabbis repunctuate the verse to make it mean the opposite of what it seems to say: "She has fallen and will no more rise, the virgin of Israel" to "She has fallen and will no more; rise, O virgin of Israel!"

This might appear as a somewhat outrageous interpretation; the rabbis create problems in the simple, literal meanings of the text where there don't seem to be any, make odd and anachronistic juxtapositions of verses and seemingly forced reconciliations of them with the original text. They open up gaps to close them, and so reopen the text, make it meaningful again. They break up the flow of the narrative, atomize verses and words, fragment the canon and collapse time. They use the forces of rupture, fragmentation, disorder, so to speak, against themselves. They wrestle with the text, as did Jacob with the angel. But they, not the angel, do the wounding — the wounding of words, the turning, troping, piercing — all to wrangle the blessing from the text.

One may ask, however, how self-conscious are the rabbis when they perform these interpretive feats? Do they think of themselves as "belated interpreters" to use Harold Bloom's words, who are caught in an Oedipal struggle with an overwhelming precursor text? Are they conscious of "violating" the plain sense of Scripture? Are these cunning strategies like those of the wily Jacob whose blessings come through disguise and trickery of his blind father Isaac? Are these strategies only a response to an historical condition?

It is difficult, of course, to answer these questions with any absolute certainty. What modern literary theory, especially "post-structuralism," contributes to the discussion is its concept of literary language as that aspect of language which is shifting, ambiguous, multivalent, and of rhetoric and troping not as *distortions* of language but as the "normal" and essential force within it such that ordinary speaking or "plain meaning" is a tamed case, not the norm.

The rabbis, of course, were dealing with a text that they believed to be divine, and with a God who created the world through speech. Turning

and turning Scripture was, thus, somehow tapping into the very essence of that divine language itself — not distorting the text, but entering into its force, the very movement of its meaning. There is, then, an intriguing parallel between the nature of “literariness” as defined in secular literary theory and the nature of “divinity” in the divine language of the text. This parallel may help make more comprehensible what appear to be oddities of rabbinic technique, and also why the rabbis made the extraordinary assertion that their own *interpretations* were also part of *revelation*, already given at Sinai. For the turning of language on itself, into the depths of possible meaning is the point where divine and human meet, converse, wrestle. Language, Holy Scripture, mediates between human and God in the most profound way; it is where man/woman and God are entangled like the wrestling of Jacob and his angel in the night.

The turning of language over onto itself by the Jew and God creates a pocket, an enclosure where the two may be together. But this is a strange enclosure, both empty and full at once. This turning creates echoes and reverberations where words within words are elicited, where the divine voice is heard in its echoes, and is called to by its seekers. So the rabbis interpret the verse in Psalms 62:12, “Once has God spoken, twice have I heard this,” to mean, “This was in accord with the school of R. Ishmael who taught that the verse [from Jer. 23:19] ‘Is not my word like fire, says the Lord, like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces’ means that just as the hammer splits the rock into many fragments, so one verse may be split into many meanings” (*Sanh.* 43a).

Turning, then, is also splitting, fragmenting in the sense of opening up: in midrash, one does not approach God by trying to make language transparent, straightening it out (“doing theology”) — but by hammering, twisting it around . . . opening language into itself. Perhaps, then, the divinity of language is precisely this openness wherein the Other, God as infinite and alien can enter into human discourse and existence; and yet that aspect of the text which, therefore, is always also elusive, enigmatic, always receding as much as approaching, fading as much as speaking, escaping ultimate closure. For ultimate closure would mean silence.

This openness within language, enabling the rabbis to turn it and turn it, is the opening that leads to God, an opening to the divine within language. And it is an opening into a labyrinth of mazes and turns which lead to many directions at once (some contemporary theorists might call this “intertextuality”). For the rabbis, God speaks as much by what is left “out” of the apparent plain meaning of the text as by what is put in. Perhaps that is part of their meaning when they described the primordial Torah which preceded and acted as a blueprint for the world and then was given to Moses as “made of a parchment of white fire, and written upon with black fire and sealed with fire” (*Deut. Rab.* 3:12; *Jer. Sot.* 8:22; *Jer. Shek.* 6:49d; Rashi on *Deut.* 33:2). The opening is the fire within the



letter, perhaps like the fire coming out of the burning bush but not consuming it.

For though one can turn and turn it, one cannot alter even one letter of Scripture, say the rabbis. A flaw in even one letter makes a whole Torah scroll ritually invalid. The fire in the letters is not one which consumes them, demolishes them for a higher truth. The fire, unlike Paul the apostle's "spirit," is not opposed to the letter: the letter does not kill; rather, it burns, glows with the inner life of divine language itself. There is no meaning apart from the letters — they are not transcended, but turned again and again, always remaining.

### III

Yet, how far do the openings within language extend? What are the limits of interpretation? How do the rabbis keep the opening from becoming another violent rupture, a gap which cannot be breached. And how far do the insights of modern literary theory extend?

Modern literary theory is intimately involved with linguistics, and modern linguistics is often said to have begun around the turn of the century with the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, the Swiss linguist. In a break with previous historical and philosophical studies, he defined language as a "system of signs." He wanted to make the study of language scientific, to construct a self-contained and autonomous study of linguistics. He argued that the value or meaning of a sign is determined not by what it *represents* (by what is "outside" language), but by its *difference* from other signs. A sign, he said, was composed of two elements, a "signifier" and a "signified," and the relation between them was *arbitrary*. There is no necessary reason why "cat" means furry animal. Moreover, the meaning of cat occurs because of the difference between signifiers — because "cat" is differentiated from "*bat*" and "*hat*" and "*that*." Meaning, then is a function of difference. In language, said Saussure, there are only differences with no positive terms . . . differences between signifiers and between signs. The question then arises, what are the limits of this differential process? When does the movement of difference stop and stabilize meaning? Where is there a positive identity on which we can rest?<sup>7</sup>

Here Saussure institutes the language/speech distinction (*langue*/*parole*). Language (*langue*) is the ahistorical "system," the milieu of sign relationships. To use his words, this system is one of "pure values determined by nothing outside the momentary state of its terms." "Speech" or *parole* is the actual use of language by individuals, the combinations and concrete meanings, sounds and so forth. For Saussure, though, the real object of investigation is language, *langue* — not speech, *parole*. Yet *langue* is defined by nothing outside the momentary state of its terms, and these

7. A good introduction to Saussure is Jonathan Culler, *Ferdinand deSaussure* (New York: Penguin, 1976).

terms are themselves defined by nothing positive, only by negative values, differences. Language, that is, is pure *form*, not substance. Later linguistics has criticized the language/speech opposition for different reasons (Chomsky changes the terms to competence/performance, for example). The post-structuralists maintain that *langue* is simply a heuristic fiction, no real ground at all.

Saussure's view of language is also, in a certain sense, inimical to a rabbinic view. For the rabbis, language was not arbitrary, nor did it consist of only empty formalist relations. Words and things were intimately and necessarily connected. It is commonplace to note that the Hebrew word for "word" also means "thing." In another sense, though, Saussure created a kind of secular version of the divine language. That is, in wanting to make linguistics self-contained and autonomous, Saussure adopts a displaced theological idea: the attribute of divinity as totally self-contained, self-related, autonomous. This is one reason why one can make a certain correlation between "literariness" in modern literary theory, and "divinity" in rabbinic texts. The language of God is divine, too, in being autonomous — i.e., self-reflexive, wholly immanent. Torah precedes and creates the world; the referent of the world is Torah, not vice versa. Moreover, one of the attributes of the "canonical" is completeness, self-containment: "Everything is in it." The self-reflexiveness of Scripture makes its meanings immanent: a verse in the book of Psalms is understood through the verse in the prophet Amos, for example.

In the modern era, the loss of religious belief means the loss of the divine connection between words and things, language and reality. As Frederic Jameson, citing Nietzsche, puts it, we are trapped in the "prison-house of language." "Structure," "system," "*langue*" are thus the ghostly fictions which take the place that God would have. (For the New Critics also, the text itself was invested with this divine power of autonomy, self-containment and immanent meaning. One should not confuse a work's meaning, they argued, with its historical background, the author's intentions or biography, and so forth.) Language is emptied and formalized. Yet, too, a kind of emptying out as opening up was one phase of the rabbinic enterprise as well, but generated by the sense of ultimate Otherness of the Divine. Or: perhaps one needs first to empty out in order to open up. This might be one way of understanding the Kabbalistic idea of *zimzum*: in order for the world to be created, God had first to "contract" Himself, withdraw, open a space. Similarly, say the Kabbalists, there are deeper levels of meaning to the Torah beyond its narrative stories. "Decoded," "opened," the entire Torah is composed of permutations and combinations of the names of God (see Ramban, introduction to his Torah commentary). The holiest Name of God was connected to God's essence, but ultimately beyond human knowledge, communication, and any specific meaning.

Yet, for literary theory, emptiness is *not* that Other as enigmatic



wrestling partner speaking through language. Language with a capital "L" has taken the place of God — or become a "God-term," an explanatory principle, a ground, a self-reflexive entity. Moreover, as the Bible was being desacralized by historical and critical scholarship in the nineteenth century, literature, through the efforts of critics like Matthew Arnold and others, was becoming a substitute religion and "sacralized." Writes Arnold, creeds and dogmas are now all questionable, traditions are dissolving:

The strongest part of our religion today is its unconscious poetry. . . . More and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us. Without poetry, our science will appear incomplete; and philosophy will be replaced by poetry. It is literary criticism which will now teach us "the best that is known and thought in the world."<sup>8</sup>

Say the rabbis, "The Torah speaks in human language." In the human attempt to divinize and "divine" language, is there a strange point of intersection with the rabbis immersed in their prison-house of the text, meditating on the divine language speaking to humans? And what does it mean to say "God speaks"? Analyzing exactly what the Israelites heard at Mt. Sinai when the Ten Commandments were given, the rabbis offer different views: one opinion holds that they heard the divine voice speak directly; another holds that, in fact, they heard only the first two commandments ("I am the Lord your God" and "Thou shalt have no other Gods before me" Ex. 20:2-3) and were too overwhelmed to hear the rest. Moses received and repeated them in a human voice. Writes Maimonides, the Israelites heard the inarticulate *sound* of the divine voice, but only Moses heard the meaningful articulation of the *words* and communicated them:

. . . God spoke to Moses, and the people only heard the mighty sound, not distinct words. It is to the perception of this mighty sound that Scripture refers in the passage, "When ye hear the sound" (Deut. 5:20); again it is stated, "You heard a sound of words" (Deut. 4:12), and it is not said, "You heard words": and even when the hearing of the words is mentioned, only the perception of the sound is meant. It was only Moses that heard the words, and he reported them to the people (*Guide for the Perplexed II:33*).

The hassidic master, Mendel of Rymonov, went even further: all they really heard, he claimed, was the first letter of the first word, the "aleph" of the word *anokhi* ("I"). Aleph is the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, the sound produced by a simple opening of the larynx. Comments Gershom Scholem:

[The aleph is] nothing more than the possibility taken by the larynx when a word begins with a vowel. Thus the aleph may be said to denote the source of all articulate sound. The Kabbalists regarded it as the spiritual root of all other letters, encompassing in its essence the whole alphabet and hence all

8. Matthew Arnold, "The Study of Poetry," in Hazard Adams, ed., *Critical Theory Since Plato* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1971), p. 596.

other elements of human discourse. To hear the *aleph* is to hear next to nothing; it is the preparation for all audible language, but in itself conveys no determinate, specific meaning.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, writes Scholem, the Rabbi of Rymonov daringly transformed the meaning of revelation at Sinai into a "mystical revelation pregnant with infinite meaning, but without specific meaning": only through translation into human language could it become the foundation of religious authority, making the grounds of religious authority ultimately based upon human interpretation.

It is the openness of the divine language which leads simultaneously into its secret creative depths and out toward human meaning. In Scholem's view, too, the central problem for all mystics is that point of intersection between the divine and human languages, for "they [the mystics] have sensed an abyss, a depth in language they want to explore and master,"<sup>10</sup> a hidden dimension beyond the use of language as instrumental communication — a place where language turns and turns upon itself.

Walter Benjamin, the great German-Jewish literary critic who died while trying to escape the Nazis, was mentor to and intimate friend of Gershom Scholem, "the friend of a lifetime," as Scholem describes him in the epigraph dedicating his masterwork, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, to Benjamin. The two of them exerted a profound intellectual influence on each other, especially in the area of philosophy of language. In contrast to Saussure, Benjamin, in his early essays, argued that the essence of language was not a system of arbitrary signs — nor was it to be identical with any practical act of communication, or information. There is, instead, a pure language, hidden and elusive; the task of the translator is to regain this pure language, to release it:

In this pure language — which no longer means or expresses anything but is, as expressionless and creative Word, that which is meant in all languages — all information, all sense, and all intention finally encounter a stratum in which they are destined to be extinguished.<sup>11</sup>

The essence of man's language, writes Benjamin in his commentary on the first chapters of Genesis, is the name, and the ability to name things, and "in naming, the mental being of man communicates itself to God." Naming is the "language of language," and thus does man complete God's creation. The rhythm of the act of creation in Genesis is: Let there be — He made (created) — He named. But the "absolute relation of name to knowledge exists only in God, only there is name, because it is inwardly identical with the creative word, the pure medium of knowl-

9. Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, trans. Ralph Mannheim (New York: Schocken, 1965), pp. 29-30.

10. Scholem, "The Name of God and the Linguistic Theory of the Kabbalah," *Diogenes* 79 (1972): 61-62.

11. Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1978), p. 316.



edge." Human language, the names that Adam gives to the creatures, the proper name, is the "communion of man with the creative word of God," but human language ultimately falls short of the creative word of God, especially after the Fall. The knowledge of good and evil that is acquired with eating the forbidden fruit means abandoning the name as immanent knowledge for the human word as mediated — communicating something outside itself, something external. Language becomes a set of arbitrary signs, "prattle," and, therefore, a judging word causing expulsion from Eden. Language has become a means: "... in the Fall, man abandoned immediacy in the communication of the concrete, name, and fell into the abyss of the mediateness of all communication, of the word as means, of the empty word, into the abyss of prattle."<sup>12</sup> Thus the Tower of Babel and linguistic multiplicity.

The pure creative word is beyond ordinary communication, but is this purity, indeed, the purity of the ultimate divine Word, or the projection of an emptied modernist literary sensibility? Does a linguistic mysticism with a belief in the magic of language beyond ordinary communication, a divine potency and fullness, intersect with an ultimate emptiness as openness, a divine abyss where one might also locate the abysses faced by modern poets and critics? Or are these poets and critics committing the ultimate heresy of trying to appropriate the divine word for themselves?

In his essay on the linguistic theory of the Kabbalah, Scholem looks to the poets for the answer to the modern Jewish predicament. Tradition can no longer be handed down, he writes, and falls silent:

This, then, is the great crisis of language in which we find ourselves. We are no longer able to grasp the last summit of that mystery that once dwelt in it. The fact that language can be spoken is, in the opinion of the Kabbalists, owed to the name, which is present in language. What the value and worth of language will be — the language from which God will have withdrawn — is the question which must be posed by those who still believe they can hear the echo of the vanished word of the creation in the immanence of the world. This is a question to which, in our times, only the poets presumably have the answer. For poets do not share the doubts that most mystics have in regard to language. And poets have one link with the masters of the Kabbalah, even when they reject Kabbalistic theological formulation as being still too emphatic. This link is their belief in language as an absolute, which is as if constantly flung open by dialectics. It is their belief in the mystery of language which has to become audible.<sup>13</sup>

Edmond Jabès identifies the condition of the post-modern writer with that of the Jew, but one sees in his work how the "flinging open" of language can also become an extreme negativity which borders on a heretical faith:

12. Benjamin, "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man," *Reflections*, ed. Peter Demetz (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1978), pp. 316, 328.

13. Scholem, "Name of God," p. 194.

"God" as the extreme Name of the Abyss. "Jew" as the figure of exile, wandering strangeness, and separation, a condition which is also that of the writer. "Book" as the impossibility of the book, or as the place and non-place of all possibility of constructing the book. "Name" as the unpronounceability of the Name as cancelling of all names, the silent Name of God, of the Invisible.

I have said that to be a Jew is to take responsibility for all books, through obsession with the single Book. I have said that the death of one Jew is the death of all the words of the book, of all the books of the unfinished Book. I have said that the Jew's will to survive is in his persistence in beginning the word anew. I have said that the Messiah was the extreme openness of the book, being the word which points to itself by that opening. I have said that the Jew, at the newest, oldest, and most risky part of his quest, was no longer a Jew to other Jews and that that paradox was one of the keys to Judaism.

Wandering Word of God. It has for its echo the word of the wandering people.

No oasis for it, no shade, no peace, only the vast and thirsty desert, only the book of this thirst, the fire that eats the fire which reduces all books to ashes at the threshold of the haunting unreadable Book which is our legacy.<sup>14</sup>

But was this, in the end, the fire and the Book for which R. Hanina ben Teradion allowed himself to be martyred by fire? The Talmud relates (*Av. Zar.* 18a) that when the Romans came to take R. Hanina to be burned to death for teaching Torah despite their prohibition of such activity, they found him in the act of reading the Torah. As they took him, his daughter began to weep, and he questioned her why. She answered, "I weep for the Torah that is to be burned with you." He answered, "The Torah is fire, and no fire can burn fire itself." They seized him and wrapped him in the scroll of the Torah, heaped faggots around him and lit the pyre. In the moment of his agony, his disciples asked him, "Rabbi, what do you see?" He replied: "I see the parchment consumed by fire, but the letters of the Scriptures are flying upwards."

14. Edmond Jabès, *Le Soupçon, le desert* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978), pp. 85, 138-40, 228. See the recently published collection of essays on Jabès edited by Eric Gould, *The Sin of the Book: Edmond Jabès* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1985).