

mention Nimay & Shon

MERKABAH MYSTICISM AND JEWISH GNOSTICISM

The first phase in the development of Jewish mysticism before its crystallization in the mediaeval Kabbalah is also the longest.

almost one thousand years from the 2nd temple in the 1st cent, CE till the tenth cent.

practically nothing is known about those who espoused the oldest organized mystical school, tho there are some documents.

the classical period is the 4th to the 6th cent., ce and there is nothing as to the leading figures.

it is known that Palistine was the cradle of the movement, this much is certain

we know that in the period of the second temple an esoteric doctrine was already taught in the Pharisaic circles

the first chapter of Genesis, the story of creation, and the first chapter of Ezekiel, the vision of God's throne chariot (the Merkabah) were the favorite subjects of discussion and interpretation which it was apparently considered inadvisable to make public.

it is thru st. Jerome that we learn that a Jewish tradition forbids the study of the beginning and the end of the Book of Ezekiel before the completion of the 13th year, ie, manhood.

the book of Enoch particularly the Ethiopian Enoch was associated with this Jewish school.

the existence of this school conclusively disproves the old parejudice according to which all the productive religious energies of early apocalyptic were absorbed by and into Christianity after the latter's rise.

the earliest Jewish mysticism is throne-mysticism.

one is not absorbed in contemplation of God's true nature, but perception of His appearance on the throne as described by Ezekiel and also Isaiah 6, and cognition of the mysteries of the celestial throne-world.

God's pre-existing throne embodies and exemplifies all forms of creation and is the goal of the mystical vision

the 14th chap of Eth. Enoch contains the oldest description of the throne.
read from Kindle - Enoch 14 Vision

outside of Enoch, the Hekhaloth books are the most important

they describe the hekhaloth, the heavenly halls or palaces through which the visionary passes and where in the seventh and last sees the throne of divine glory.

the sphere of the throne, the "merkabah" has its "chambers" and later on, its "palaces"--a conception foreign to Ezekiel and the earlier writers in general.

this is secret knowledge ie, gnostic, which is passed on only to those initiated.

there are eight moral requisites of initiation but later even some physical ones were added which have nothing to do with moral or social status.

this gets into magic, for one of the physical was looking at the lines of the hand to see if they were favorable or not

this parallels the rise of neo-platonic mysticism in the orient during the 4th cent.

those who passed the tests were considered worthy to make the "descent" to the Merkabah which led them, after many trials, thru the 7 heavenly palaces and before that thru the heavens.

originally we have a Jewish variation on one of the chief preoccupations of the 2nd and 3rd

century gnostics and hermetics.

the ascent of the soul from the earth, thru the spheres of the hostile planet-angels and rulers of the cosmos, and its return to its divine home in the "fullness" of God's light, which to the gnostic signified redemption.

the mystical ascent is always preceded by ascetic practices whose durationn in some cases is 12 days, in others 40.

the man must first fast a number of days and lay his head between his knees and whisper many hymns and songs whose texts are known from tradition. this is the typical bodily posture of these ascetics and is also that of Elijah in his prayer on Mt. Carmel. it is favorable to the induction of pre-hynotic autosuggestion and deep self oblivian.

after all this he perceives the interior and the chambers, as if he saw the 7 palaces with his own eyes, and it is as tho he entered one palace after the other and saw what is there.

finally, after such preparations, and in a state of ecstasy, the adept begins his journey

the ascent is not descirbed in the writings in detail, but they do describe the voyage thru the 7 palaces situated in the highest heaven.

in gnostic thought there are 7 planetary spheres ruled by archons who are opposed to the liberation of the soul and must be overcome.

these have been replaced in Jewish though by gatekeepers who are posted to the rifght and left of the entance to the heavenly hall thru which the soul must pass in its ascent

in either case, the soul requires a pass word in order to be able to continue its journey w/o danger.

a magic seal made of a secret name which puts the demons and hostile angels to flight.

every new stage requires a new seal with which the traveller "seals himself" in order that "he shall not be dragged into the fire³ and the flame, the vortex and the storm which are around Thee.

all the seals and the secret names are derived from the Merkabah itself where they "stand like pillars of flame around the fiery throne: of the creator.

at first the magical protection of a single seal may be sufficient, but as the psychical energy wanes the magical strain grows and the conjuring gesture becomes progressively more strained, until in the end whole pages are filled with an apparently meaningless recital of magical key words with which he tries to unlock the closed doors.

the key concept to these mystics was God as King, the Holy King and there is a complete absence of an sentiment of divine immanence

the infinite gulf between man and God the King on His throne is not even bridged in the climax of mystical ecstasy

there is no love of God, and no trace of mystical union between the soul and God.

the mystic who in his ecstasy has passed thru all the gates, braved all the dangers, now stands before the throne; he sees and hears, but that is all.

One last thing : it seems there was an attempt to measure God's body based on the Song of Songs chap. 5. - Read Essential Kabbalah, p. 74-75

the tract is called the Shiur Komah literally, Measure of the body. and was anthropomorphic and thus aroused the bitterest antagonism among all Jewish circles which held aloof from mysticism.

the antagonism was mutual, for it is in this attitude towards anthropomorphism that Jewish rational theology and Jewish mysticism have parted company.

its enough to say that the measurements are so huge as to be unimaginable but it was said :
"whoever knows the measurements of our Creator and the glory of the Holy One, praise be to Him,
which are hidden from the creatures, is certain of his share of the world to come".

to end, there is a story in the Talmud of four rabbis who got as far as seeing the vision of the
throne in the 7th heaven .

one looked at the Merkabah and died, the next looked and went crazy, another looked and
began to tear up plants and finally Rabbi Akiba looked and came out in peace.

Akiba warns people of danger of ascending there as it can be dangerous. there are still
elements of this attitude present today.

KABBALAH II, ABULAFIA AND THE ZOHAR

As from the year 1200 the Kabbalists begin to emerge as a distinct mystical group, while still not numerically significant, they had attained considerable prominence in many parts of Southern France and Spain.

five or six generations was to exercise an ever increasing influence on Jewish life

both tradition and supernatural inspiration play their parts in the history of Kabbalism and innovations are made not only on the basis of new interpretations of ancient lore but revelation or even dream.

tradition and intuition are bound together and this would explain why Kabbalism could be deeply conservative and intensely revolutionary.

Abraham Abulafia leans frankly on divine revelation while the Zohar, written about the same time, is found in opposition of this, has little use for ecstasy.

I will discuss these two schools in this lecture.

Abulafia --is the outstanding representative of ecstatic Kabbalism and has also been the least popular of all the great Kabbalists.

it is no exaggeration to say that abulafia's work and the Zohar, published at the same time, marks the culminating point in the development of two opposing schools of thought in Spanish Kabbalism.

these are the ecstatic and the theosophical

for all their differences, the two belong together and, only if both are understood do we obtain

something like a comprehensive picture of Spanish Kabbalism.

Abulafia authored 26 Kabbalistic and 22 prophetic works.

he was attacked by the more orthodox kabbalists, but his influence as a guide to mysticism continued to remain very great.

he went so far as to include several manuals, which not only set out his theory but also constitute a guide for action

his techniques can be put into effect by practically everyone who tries.

kabbalists refrained from publishing them for fear that once this technique of meditation, which had broad appeal, became publically known its use would no longer be only for the elect.

however, the school of practical mysticism, called prophetic kabbalism, continued to lead an underground life.

Abraham Abulafia was born in Saragossa in 1240, traveled in the Near East where he studied philosophy, especially in Maimonides.

he returned to Spain in 1270 where he immersed himself in mystical research.

in Barcelona at age 31 he was overcome by the prophetic spirit.

he obtained knowledge of the true name of God, and had visions of which he himself, says later, were sent by demons to confuse him.

for 15 years he says he had Satan to his right"

in 1274 he left again for Italy and Greece.

in 1280 inspired with his mission, he went to Rome to present himself to the pope and confer with him "in the name of Jewry"

he seems to have nursed Messianic ideas and one of the beliefs was that when the time of the end comes the messiah will at God's command come to the pope and ask of him the liberation of the Jews, and only then will the Messiah be considered to have come.

the Pope, Nicholas III died suddenly in the night before he was to see him saving Abulafia from imprisonment.

Abulafia's aim, as he expressed it was "to unseal the soul, to untie the knots which bind it."

this untying is the return from multiplicity and separation towards original unity.

what he means is there are certain barriers which separate the personal existence of the soul from the stream of cosmic life

there is a dam which keeps the soul confined within the natural world and protects it against the flood of the divine stream, which flows beneath it or all around it.

this dam also prevents the soul from seeing or knowing the divine.

the "seals" thus protect it so it can function in the normal world of life but it is difficult to perceive the existence of spiritual forms and things divine.

so, the natural way must be made to disappear or be transformed so as to render the spiritual transparent.

to do this he decided the soul must concentrate on highly abstract spiritual matters, something capable of acquiring the highest importance, w/o having much particular, or if possible, importance of its own.

to meditate on objects such as birds, angels, etc. would not work since they were not abstract.

the hebrew alphabet he believed fulfills all the conditions for meditation because they are

abstract and not an object,

so he develops a theory of the mystical contemplation of letters and their configurations, as the constituents of God's name.

the individual letters of their combinations need have no 'meaning' in the ordinary sense, it is an advantage if they are meaningless

the purpose of this discipline then is to stimulate, with the aid of methodical meditation, a new state of consciousness; this state can best be defined as an harmonious movement of pure thought, which has severed all relation to the senses.

he compared this to music, for the science of combination is a music of pure thought, in which the alphabet takes the place of the musical scale.

this opens the closed doors of the soul which is no longer bound to sense, and using the letters of the great Name throws open the way to God. *Revel p. 103-04 Essential Kabbalah*

every language, not only Hebrew, is transformed into a transcendental medium of the one and only language of God and every language issues from a corruption of the aboriginal language, Hebrew and they all remain related to it.

jumping or skipping is one of the techniques given in his manuals and in fact is nothing else than a very remarkable method of using associations as a way of meditation.

it is not wholly the "free play of association" known to psychoanalysis, but it is the way of passing from one association to another determined by certain rules which are, however, sufficiently lax.

every "jump" opens a new sphere, defined by certain formal, not material, characteristics.

the point is that it is said to assure extraordinary results as far as the "widening of the consciousness: is concerned.

this "jumping" brings to light hidden processes of the mind, "it liberates us from the prison of the natural sphere and leads us to the boundries of the divine sphere."

many of his techniques represent a Judaized version of the ancient techniques of Yoga found in India.

he has breathing techniques, rules of body posture, certain forms of recitation, and this opening of consciousness looks much like the techniques of Rinzai Zen koans.

the state of ecstasy as described by Abulafia, frequently, so it seems, on the basis of personal experience, also carries with it something like an anticipatory redemption.

the illuminate feels himself not only aglow with a heavenly fire, but also as it were annointed with sacred and miraculous oil.

he becomes "the Lord's annointed" ie, the messiah, for the brief period of his ecsgtatical experience.

Abulafia calls his method The Path of the Names in contrast to the Kabbalists of his time who speak of the path of the sefiroth.

only together the two paths form the whole of the Kabbalah.

the student of Kabbalah is to begin with the contemplation of the 10 Sefiroth, these during meditation are to become objects of quickened imagination rather than objects of an external knowledge.

only after this can one proceed to the 22 letters of the hebrew alphabet which represent a deeper stage of penetration into the divine.

abulafia himself decisively rejected magic and condemned in advance all attempts to use the doctrine of the holy names for magical purposes.

he has resolutely taken the path that leads inwards and has pursued it as far as anybody in latter-day Judaism, but this path runs along the border between mysticism and magic.

there are certain points at which the belief of the mystic easily becomes that of the magician and many of his successors fell into confusion and tended to expect from the inward path the power to change the outer world.

unfortunately, Abulafia's doctrine of combination came to be regarded by later generations as the key not only to the mysteries of Divinity but also to the exercise of magical powers.

THE ZOHAR

The Zohar or "the book of splendor" is the best known of all the Kabbalistic writings.

it was written in 1275 or 76 , nearly the same time as Abulafia' was publishing.

it is a mystical commentary on the Pentatuch covering the creation, early stories (Noah, Babel, etc.), the patriarchs (Abraham, Jacob) the exodus, law, priesthood and the wilderness experience, etc.

it was written in Aramaic and was propoerted to be written by a first century rabbi, but we know this is not so,

it is not systematic and rarely cites the tradition but is closely tied to the scriptures.

the language of the Zohar is that of a writer who has experienced the common fears of mankind as profoundly as anyone.

for this reason if for no other it struck a chord which resounded deeply in human hearts and assured it a success denied to other forms of early Kabbalism

taken as a whole, the Zohar must be regarded as the complete antithesis to the system of Abulafia.

this is Jewish theosophy and is a 13th cent. attempt to preserve the substance of naive popular faith, now challanged by the rational theology of the philosophers.

by theosophy i am talking about a mystical doctrine, or school of thought, which purports to perceive and to describe the mysterious workings of the Divinity, perhaps also believing it possible to become absorbed in its contemplation.

theosophy postulates a kind of divine emanation whereby God, abandoning his self-contained repose, awakens to mysterious life. and it maintains that the mysteries of creation reflect the

pulsation of this divine life.

when we get to Christianity Jacob Boehme and William Blake are theosophists also,

I have referred already to this in the introductory lecture but will discuss it some more the world of the Sefirot or spheres.

sefirot originally meant numbers but changed its meaning until it came to signify the emergence of divine powers and emanations.

the difference between the old Merkabah mysticism and this Kabbalistic system is that the world of the Merkabah, with its celestial throne, heavenly household and palaces thru which the wanderer passes, is no longer of supreme importance.

some kabbalists go so far as to refer to Ezekiel's Merkabah as the 2nd merkabah., in other words it has been given a deeper layer of mystical reality, an "inner Merkabah"

now one can do more than see the throne, and penetrate into a new field of contemplation beyond the throne, and this is at the roots of the original impulse of the Zohar.

for the Zohar the sefirot had the unbroken reality of mystical experience.

the hidden God , the innermost Being of Divinity, has neither qualities or attributes. this is, as discussed, En Sof, the Infinite.

as this hidden Being is active throughout the universe, it has also certain attributes which in turn represent certain aspects of the divine nature.

the mystic believes in the existence of a sphere of divine reality where each sphere constitutes one of the sefirot.

the Zohar expressly distinguishes between two worlds, which both represent God.

first, the primary world, the most deeply hidden of all which remains insensible and

unintelligible to all but God, the world of En sof and

second the joined to the first which makes it possible to know God, and of which the Bible says "open ye the gates that I may enter", the world of attributes

the two in reality form one like the coal and the flame,

the coal exists also w/o a flame, but its latent power manifest itself only in its light.

God's mystical attributes are such worlds of light in which the dark nature of En-Sof manifests itself.

there are 10 fundamental attributes to God, which are at the same time ten stages thru which the divine life pulsates back and forth.

the point to keep in mind is that the sefiroth are not secondary or intermediary spheres which interpose between God and the universe, like the middle stages of the neo-platonists which are outside God.

but these sefiroth are plainly regarded not as the steps of a ladder between God and the world, but as various phases in the manifestation of the Divinity which proceed from and succeed each other.

the emanation of the sefirot is conceived as a process that takes place in God, and which at the same time enables humans to perceive God. - Read Essential Kab. p. 29-30

these 10 emanations in which En Sof manifests itself comprise an endless variety of shades and gradations.

these gradations each have its own symbolic name and almost every biblical word corresponds to one of the sefiroth.

this is why the kabbalists base their interpretation of scripture on the assumption that every

verse not only describes an event in nature or history, but in addition is a symbol of a certain stage in the divine process, an impulse of the divine life.

this mystical conception of the Torah is fundamental for the understanding of the peculiar symbolism of the Zohar

the whole Torah is nothing but the one great and holy name of God, according to the Zohar's author.

the nature of this mystical symbolism is one of the main obstacles to a true understanding of a word of mystical exegesis like the Zohar, and yet this elaborate and often bizarre symbolism is the key to its particular religious world.

these ten spheres of the Sefirot have a number of more or less fixed terms which are employed by the Zohar. these common or fixed names are:

1. Kether Elyon, the "supreme crown" of God
2. Hokhmah, the "wisdom" or primordial idea of God
3. Binah the "intelligence" of God
4. Hesed the "love" or mercy
5. Gevurah the "power" of God chiefly manifested as the power of stern judgement and punishment.
6. Rahamin the "compassion" of God to which falls the task of mediating between the two proceeding.
7. Netsah the "lasting endurance" of God
8. Hod the "majesty" of God
9. Yesod the "foundation" or "basis" of all active forces in God.

10. Malkhuth the "kingdom" of God, ususally described in the Zohar as the mystical archetype of Israel's community, or as the shekhinah.

the the lowest of the sefiroth, malkhuth is the most important for this is the heavenly model of the community of Israel,

the idea is that what happens to Israel as a community affects heaven.

I will discuss the shekhinah a little later.

the world of the sefiroth is described as a a mystical organism with the two most important images being a "tree" and a "man"

the En Sof is not only the hidden root of this tree, but the sap of the tree for every branch, or attribute exists not by itself but by virtue of En Sof.

this tree is the skeleton of the universe and grows throughout the whole of creation

all mundane and created things exist only because something of the power of the sefiroth lives and acts in them.

the simile of a man is used as often as that of a tree since man was created in the image of God it means, first, that the power of the sefiroth , the paradigm of divine life, exists and is active in man and

second, that the world of the sefiroth, is capable of being visualize3d under the image of man the created.

the symbolic figure Adam Kadmon, the primordial Man is part of Iranian mythology who stands behind the world. we will discuss this more next week with Isaac Luria.

the conception of God as an organism had the advantage of answering the question why there are different manifestations of the divine power, altho the divine Being is an Absolute whole.

the action and development of that mysterious force which is the seed of all creation is, according to the Zohar's interpretation of the scriptural testimony, none other than speech.

"God spoke and this speech is a force which at the beginning of creative thought was separated from the secret of En sof."

the process of life in God can be construed as the unfolding of the elements of speech.

this is one of the Zohar's favorite symbols.

the world of divine emanation is one in which the faculty of speech is anticipated in God.

God, in the most deeply hidden of his manifestations, when he has just decided to launch upon his work of creation, is called He.

God in the complete unfolding of his Being, Grace and Love, in which He becomes capable of being perceived by the "reason of the heart" and therefore of being expressed is called "You".

but God, in His supreme manifestation, where the fullness of His Being finds its final expression in the last and all embracing of his attributes, is called "I".

this is the stage of true individuation in which God as a person says "I" to Himself.

this divine self, this "I", according to the theosophical kabbalists is the Shekhinah, the presence and immanence of God in the whole of creation.--this is one of their most profound doctrines.

it is the point where humans, in attaining the deepest understanding of his own self, becomes aware of the presence of God and only from there does man progress into the deeper regions of the divine, into his "You" and "He". and into the depths of Nothing.

the Zohar identifies the highest development of God's personality with precisely that stage of His unfolding which is nearest to human experience, indeed which is immanent and mysteriously present in every one of us.

there are two creations spoken of in Genesis, that's why it begins with beth, the second letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Bereshet = in The Beginning

the creation of our phenomenal world is an external aspect of something which already happened in God.

the primordial point on the sefirot is Hokhmah or wisdom.

God's wisdom represents the ideal thought of Creation, conceived as the ideal point which itself springs from the impulse of En Sof.

the essence of all that exists is derived from God's wisdom

the sefirot binah, or intelligence then began to differentiate between things what had been undifferentiated in God's wisdom.

Binah is the "supernal mother" the "pure totality of all individuation"

thus, the seven sefirot which flow from the maternal womb of the Binah are the seven primeval days of creation.

what appears in time as the epoch of actual and external creation is nothing but the projection of the archetypes of the seven lower sefirot which, in timeless existence, are enshrined in God's inwardness.

thus, God unfolds his totality in the "great sea" of malkuth, or the Shekinah, on the last day of creation.

thus numbers 4 thru 10 on the tree of the sefirot are the creation of this world.

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so there are three worlds: 1. the world of En Sof, 2. world of the sefiroth, and 3. world of phenomena.

basically the Zohar, tho using theistic language, is pantheistic tho both tendencies are present.

statements like "If one contemplates the things in mystical meditation, everything is revealed as one", or

"He fills everything and He is everything" or,

"Everything is linked with everyting else down to the lowest ring on the chain, and the true essence of God is above as well as below, in the heavens and on the earth, nothing exists outside Him."

~~One can see why orthodox Judaism saw most mystics as heretics~~

the shekinah

i want to say some more about this concept since it represnets a reenstatment on an ancient conception and represents one of the most important constituents of kabbalism.

tho it is spoken of in the Midrash and the Talmud, there is no hint that it represents a feminine element in God.

the introduction of this idea was one of the most important and lasting inovations of Kabbalism.

the fact that it obtained recognition in spite of the obvious difficulty of reconciling it with the conception of the absolute unity of God, and that no other element of Kabbalism won such a degree of popular approval, is proof that it responed to a deep-seated religious need.

the conception of the shekinah as the as the feminine element in God was a stumbling block to

many but in time the idea became part of the creed of wide circles among the Jewish communities of Europe and the East.

the union of God and the shekinah constitutes the true unity of God, which lies beyond the diversity of His various aspects.

before the fall, the core of the shekinah was in the lower regions and heaven and earth were one in perfect harmony and God filled everything complete and unhindered.

but with Adam's sin, the order of things was turned to disorder, and the heavenly channel was broken

this led to what the kabbalists call the "exile of the shekinah" Only after the restoration of the original harmony in the act of redemption, will God be one and His name One.

however, in the community of Israel, the shekinah is immediately present, for the earthly community of Israel is formed after the archetype of the mystical community of Israel which is the shekinah.

this is why everything done by the individual or the community in the mundane sphere is magically reflected in the upper region.

to quote a favorite expression of the Zohar: "the impulse from below calls forth that from above."

DEVEKUTH

this is the supreme religious value the Zohar in common with all spanish kabbalism, places in the center of its ethical system

this means continuous attachment or adhesion to God, and is a direct relationship which almost takes the place of the ecstatic experience.

tho it is definately a contemplative value, it is not predicated upon special or abnormal modes of consciousness.

this really means that your will is that of God for when your will agrees with God's will, then one is perpetually with God. "I do anything I want because I am changed and do whatever God wants."

the mystic and God cannot be seperated, the mystic is elevated with rank to what God is naturally. in the mystic state, the human being and Torah are one for God is wholly in it.

Devekuth is the state that the prophets were in when in the Hebrew Bible they declared the word of God,

it is being "one with the world of light."

path to devekuth

the acheiement of this state can be realized in the normal life of the individual in the community.

it is therefore capable of being transformed into a social value, a point of great importance in the susequent influence of Kabbalism on popular ethics.

all other values, love of God, purity of thought, fear of God, chastity, study, penitence and prayer are set in relation to this highest ideal and take their ultimate significance from it.

poverty as a value is seen for the first time in rabbinical Judaism in the Zohar.

it is possible this was influenced by the spread of the spiritual Franciscans and found its most impressive representative in Petrus Olivi in Spain during the very years the Zohar was being written.

the the mystic, the poor are "God's broken vessels"

the Shekinah, in other words, God himself, in the last of his manifestations, is poor for "She has

nothing from herself" but only what she receives from the stream of the sefiroth

the alms from which the poor live reflect symbolically the mystical state of the shekhinah.

the Zaddik then is the righteous man, one who has attained devkuth which is the highest state.

Zaddik

it is hardly an accident that among the ethical values glorified by the Kabbalists, only study of the Torah is of a purely intellectual nature.

more stress is in other virtues, though they never took celibacy as a value for marriage was sacred and the first command was to "be fruitful and multiply".

eschatology of the soul is the last thing covered in the Zohar

Like all Kabbalists, he teaches the pre-existence of all souls since the beginning of creation indeed he asserts that the pre-existent souls were already pre-formed in their full individuality while they were still hidden in the womb of eternity.

they were "hidden in the divine idea, every one in its peculiar form."

but already in this pre-existent state, there are differences and gradations in the position of souls. each soul is given an 'audience' by God before its descent into the mundane body and that soul vows to complete its mission on earth by pious acts and mystical cognition of God.

the doctrine of transmigration of souls, influenced by the gnostics through the book Bahir and it is also influenced by the Catharists, until 1220 the chief religious force in south France

taken together, the spiritual outlook of the zohar might well be defined as a mixture of theosophic theology, mythical cosmogony, and mystical psychology and anthropology.

God, the universe and the soul do not lead separate lives, each on its own plane.

the original act of creation in fact knows nothing of such clear-cut division, but this was the

cosmic fruit of human sin.

The Zohar has had fascinating appeal to the mind because it is bound up with a unique combination of these three elements into a colorful whole.

These are obviously pantheistic statements and explain why orthodox Judaism saw most mystics as heretical.