

*Moshe Idel*



## **WHITE LETTERS: FROM R. LEVI ISAAC OF BERDITCHEV'S VIEWS TO POSTMODERN HERMENEUTICS**

Eighteenth-century Hasidism has exercised a significant impact on the perception of Judaism in many modern intellectual circles. This influence is indebted to the successful efforts of Martin Buber, to the dissemination of hasidic concepts and attitudes in Abraham J. Heschel's writings, to the studies of Gershom Scholem and his students, and finally, to the psychoanalytical-Jungian studies that resorted to hasidic sources.<sup>1</sup> Due to these many different studies, this form of Jewish mysticism has affected the scholarship of religion in different ways.<sup>2</sup> Less known, however, is the possible, though modest, contribution of some aspects of hasidic hermeneutics to modern and postmodern hermeneutics. As we are now only in the initial state of scholarship regarding this mystical lore, it is hardly possible to assess the main lines of hasidic hermeneutics.<sup>3</sup> It is, however, possible to observe that the literature of Hasidism is mainly of an exegetical type that explores various aspects of the theory of texts as found in kabbalistic writings, at times amplifying the importance of some, at times relegating others to the margin, and in some other cases offering new solutions to older questions.

I would like here to address a number of hasidic discussions dealing with the status of the imagined white letters allegedly hidden within the text of the Torah scroll, some of which have already been analyzed by Gershom Scholem. As we shall see below in the last section, several modern scholars of the first rank, such as Jacques Derrida, Umberto Eco, and George Steiner, have adopted Scholem's understanding of this topic. I believe that this view deserves a more detailed analysis, especially in relation to the sources and meaning of the passage that informed those modern philosophers of the nature of the text. Here the hasidic understanding of the subject is emphasized, while the kabbalistic background is seen as being less pertinent for the point I would like to make. Let me also add that in this context I cannot address the sources of the understanding of the white spaces in texts speculated about by William Blake and Stephane Mallarmé. Their affinities to Kabbalah are plausible, but their existence does not affect our present discussions.<sup>4</sup>

Hasidic masters were attracted by the nonsemantic aspects of the Bible, especially its oral performance as part of the Torah study.<sup>5</sup> Unlike the deep concern of kabbalists with the visual aspects of the letters and with the special structure of the scroll of the Torah as a whole, hasidic masters cultivated a strong interest in the sonorous aspects of the canonical texts: the ritual of Torah reading, prayer, and the study of the Torah, which in many cases means the study of rabbinic material as well.<sup>6</sup> Let me build on this observation by recalling a comment made by the son of one of the earliest followers of the Besht himself, R. Mordekhai of Chernobyl. Following some earlier teachings in which the Torah letters were described as containers of the divine light, he argued that they are, in fact, “palaces for the revelation of the light of *‘Ein Sof*, blessed be He and blessed His Name, that is clothed within them. When someone studies the Torah and prays, then they [!] take them out of the secret places and their light is revealed here below. . . . By the cleaving of man to the letters of the Torah and [the letters of] the prayer, he draws down onto himself the revelation of the light of *‘Ein Sof*.”<sup>7</sup>

The light of the Infinite is an energetic entity, which can be caused to descend and impact positively on the mystic. Penetrating to the core of the letters by the act of cleaving amounts to leaving behind the mental cargo of the word to which that letter belongs and the achievement of an encounter with the divine force imminent within it. Quite emblematic is the mention of prayer and study of the Torah together as producing the same result. This means that what is crucial is not so much the semantic content of the texts to which one is linked but, rather, unknown ciphers that organize the texts, whose efficacy is a matter of belief. The immersion of the student of the Torah or of the person who prays in the text as composed not of words but of discreet letters that should be contemplated separately enables a form of approach that is less dependent upon the original content of the canonical texts and more directly guided by the spiritual propensities of the mystic.

Concern with the visual aspects of the text is usually of secondary importance in Hasidism. It is, however, to be noted that in some kabbalistic sources, and a few hasidic ones, the view is set forth that there is a religious significance not only to the black signs in the text that constitute the Hebrew letters but also to the white space that encompasses them.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Gershom Scholem has already analyzed one of the relatively rare hasidic discussions dealing with the white “letters.” The specific text in question deals with an apotheosis of the white aspects of the Torah found in a tradition connected to the famous late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century hasidic master R. Levi Isaac of Berdichev.<sup>9</sup> In the following paragraphs I would like to analyze this same hasidic text in some detail for two reasons. First, this hasidic

master appears to have paid more attention to this topic than any prior Jewish sage. Second, his view has been misinterpreted so as to suggest that his meaning was intended to be innovative rather than conservative and preservative. In effect, R. Levi Isaac, an icon of orthodoxy, was, in the second half of the twentieth century, transformed into a potential heretic by a hint in Scholem's interpretation—and then into an actual heretic by some of Scholem's readers.

#### HASIDISM AND THE "NEW TORAH"

Let me begin my detailed discussion by introducing the passage from R. Levi Isaac that serves as the basis for the radical understanding that has been advanced. It deals with the interpretation of the verse found in Isaiah 51:4, "A Torah will go forth from me," which has been understood to refer to a "new Torah," a view already attested in earlier Jewish sources.<sup>10</sup> In a compendium of hasidic teachings compiled by one of his students, R. Levi Isaac is reported to have interpreted this phrase as follows:

We can see by the eye of our intellect why in the Torah [scroll] handed down to us one letter should not touch the other. The fact is that also the whiteness constitutes letters but we do not know how to read them as [we know] the blackness of the letters. But in the future God, blessed be He, will reveal to us even the whiteness of the Torah. Namely we will [then] understand the white letter in our Torah, and this is the meaning of "A new Torah will go forth from me" that it stands for the whiteness of the Torah, that all the sons of Israel will understand also the letters that are white in our Torah, which was delivered to Moses. But nowadays, the letters of whiteness are concealed from us. But in the song of the Sea, when it has been said "This is my Lord, I shall praise Him" [Ex. 15:2] It is written in [the writings of] Isaac Luria that "their soul had fled when they heard the song of the angels" and God had opened their ear to hear etc., and this is the reason why the maidservant had seen on the sea [more than Ezekiel has seen]—the whiteness of the letters, she saw what has not been seen etc., because the matter has been concealed until the advent of the Messiah.<sup>11</sup>

Gershom Scholem, in his reading of this passage, emphasizes the novelty of the Torah that will be revealed in the messianic future. He understood this material as being part of a larger series of kabbalistic discussions, indeed, of an entire tradition that deals with future revelations of yet-unknown parts of the Torah.<sup>12</sup> Relating this passage to a view found in the Talmud about the existence of seven books of the Pentateuch, and more substantially with the stand of *Sefer ha-Temunah*, which claims that one of the books of the Torah was lost, the above passage was interpreted by Scholem as dealing with the revelation of another religious document—or at least a part of it—now hidden.<sup>13</sup>

This reading, which inserts the hasidic passage under review within a longer and much earlier tradition with some antinomian features, is characteristic of Scholem's more general propensity to antinomianism in his phenomenology of Jewish mysticism, and this tendency has remained part and parcel of the phenomenology of many of Scholem's students and those influenced by him.<sup>14</sup> To use David Biale's terminology, this tendency is part of Scholem's "counter-history." In his historiography Scholem pays special attention to antinomian trends whose impact has at times been exaggerated, as is the case in the analysis of R. Levi Isaac's teaching here under consideration. The antinomian understanding is implicit especially in what I would call Scholem's emphasis upon the apocalyptic elements in messianism, which assume radical changes as characteristic of the end time.

Now there is no doubt that references to such radical changes are indeed found in some Jewish mystical traditions, including *Sefer ha-Temunah*. And there is also no question that R. Levi Isaac of Berditchev, in his well-known book *Kedushat ha-Levi*, mentions the *Sefer ha-Temunah* explicitly in the context of the shape of the letters.<sup>15</sup> However, it remains to be proven whether R. Levi Isaac, a pillar of traditionalism in hasidic circles, subscribed to the radical view of the earlier kabbalistic book, as Scholem suggests, because one must ask whether this Sage would knowingly present views that might weaken, or even undermine, the status of the existing canonical text. This question is so important for the phenomenology of Hasidism that I would say that a more detailed investigation into the possible sources of this hasidic master's thought, and into views adduced in his name by his entourage, is at this juncture an imperative. After all, there is a sharp disparity between the historical role played by R. Levi Isaac in the history of Hasidism and the scholarly attribution to him of an antinomian position—or even of an atheistic one, as we shall see below.

This apparent discrepancy, however, can be explained in a much less revolutionary, or subversive, manner than Scholem's analysis proposes. In my opinion, the core of R. Levi Isaac's understanding of the change in the Torah is related to the vision of God as emanating a new Torah from Himself, *me-'itti*, and since this new Torah is the revelation of the meaning of the white letters, it is, in fact, not a disclosure of a new document but, rather, the awareness that the divine essence is the real substratum of the holy text that constitutes the white letters. Such an understanding is less attractive to a modern reader than the subversive reading, but at least it is corroborated by several other pertinent discussions: one stemming from R. Levi Isaac's main teacher, another from R. Levi Isaac himself, and last but not least, those from discussions in his name cited in the work of his disciple R. Aharon of Zhitomir.

Let me, therefore, attempt to elucidate the meaning of the passage here in question by resorting to several texts that deal with this topic and which should inform any serious analysis of R. Levi Isaac's views.

An important source, which must certainly have been known to this hasidic master, is found in the teachings of R. Dov Baer of Mezeritch, who is known as the Great Maggid and who was the chief master of R. Levi Isaac. R. Dov Baer interpreted the verse from Isaiah 51:4 as follows: "Behold that the Torah in its entirety is collected from [the deeds of] righteous men, from Adam, and the forefathers, and Moses, who caused the dwelling of the *Shekhinah* on their deeds, and this is the complete Torah. However, the luminosity of the essence [*behirut `atzmiyyut*] has not been revealed yet, until the Messiah will come and they will understand the luminosity of His essence [*behirut `atzmiyyut*]. And this is the new Torah that goes forth from me, whose meaning is 'From My essence' [*Me-`atzmijuti*]."<sup>16</sup> The Great Maggid argues that the revealed Torah deals with human deeds and their interaction with the divine. The forefathers, through their actions, were able to cause the divine presence to descend to this world here below. However, the divine essence in itself is not expounded in the Torah that counts their deeds, perfect as it is. Thus, according to this passage, the luminosity of God, the new Torah, and the divine essence are explicitly related to each other. That is to say, it is not a new text that is now revealed but, rather, the depths of the canonical document already in the possession of the Jews are now exposed. Indeed, the view that the white letters are the esoteric aspect of the revealed Torah, which consists of the black letters, is found in many earlier sources, one of which is the influential book by R. Isaiah Horowitz, *The Two Tables of the Covenant*.<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, according to a tradition found in a book by a student of one of the main disciples of the Great Maggid, R. Shneur Zalman of Liady's follower R. Aharon ha-Levi of Staroselye, the "new Torah" that was not revealed at the time of creation is revealed by the performance of the commandments and the study of the Torah in this world. These actions cause the revelation of the secrets of the acts of generation.<sup>18</sup> This doctrine, then, turns out to be quite traditional and is, in principle, in agreement with the Great Maggid's teaching. Thus, in the school of the Great Maggid nothing antinomian is found. This may also be the correct interpretation in the case of the teachings of another disciple, the above-mentioned R. Levi Isaac. Or to formulate the above proposal in a different way, in the above passage the understanding of the white letters does not involve an apocalyptic, metastasic transformation but, in fact, a much more subtle and continuous transformation, one that is connected not to objective history but to a psychological transformation of the elite reader who is able to anticipate now what others will achieve only in the messianic future.

## R. LEVI ISAAC OF BERDITCHEV AND THE NEW TORAH

In his own work, R. Levi Isaac of Berditchev also comments upon the Isaiah verse in the context of the apprehension of God and the Torah without, however, mentioning any white letters.<sup>19</sup> Elsewhere, though, he writes as follows:

It is known that the letters of the Torah have the aspect of inner lights which are revealed according to the order of the emanation of the worlds. And the boundary of the white that encompasses the letters possesses the aspect of the encompassing lights, which are not revealed but are found in a hiddenness, in the aspect of the encompassing light. From this we may understand that the white boundaries also possess the aspect of letters but they are hidden letters, higher than the revealed letters . . . because the aspect of the whiteness which is [identical with] the hidden letters is derived from the revelation of the aspect of the revealed letters and that is the meaning of what has been written "The maidservant had seen on the [Red] Sea [more than what Ezekiel has seen]" because the revelation of the divinity was so great that even the maidservant was capable of understanding. This is the meaning of the verse "A new Torah will go forth from me": [That means] That in the future, when the revelation of the divinity and the Glory of God will be disclosed, and all men will see etc., the revelation of the aspect of the encompassing [light] [*sovev*] and the revelation of the aspect of the whiteness, namely the white letters which encompass the revealed letters of the Torah, [will take place]. And this is the meaning of "A new Torah will go forth from me."<sup>20</sup>

This text is drawing upon a distinction already found in a passage in the teachings of R. David ibn Avi Zimra, namely, that the white stands for the highest and hidden aspects of the divinity, though according to the kabbalist God is conceived of as encompassing both the external and the internal aspects of the world. However, R. Levi Isaac is resorting to a distinction already found in the thought of two of ibn Avi Zimra's sixteenth-century contemporaries, R. Moses Cordovero and R. Isaac Luria, that is, to a distinction between the "encompassing" divinity or the transcendental light—a view already found in thirteenth-century Kabbalah—and the inner or immanent light. In the Lurianic system the transcendental light is totally beyond human perception. For the hasidic master, the white is the transcendental aspect alone. However, what is particularly interesting in R. Levi Isaac's last passage is the assumption that the revelation of the maidservant at Sinai was higher than the highest revelation according to the kabbalists: that of the prophet Ezekiel. I take this judgment as assuming that the maidservant had, in fact, seen the divinity, which is, in this context, the white aspect of the letters. Thus, it is not only a messianic experience of the text that is implied in the knowledge of the structure of the white letters but also an experience that has taken place in the past. Moreover, according to some suggestions, it is, in principle, an

experience that is still available in the present because the white and the black letters remain intertwined.

Let me now also attempt to explicate the views of R. Levi Isaac from yet another point of view. In R. Levi Isaac's teaching, the Torah is not used in order to reach an experience of the *signifié* of the text by means of a symbolic decoding of the newly revealed letters, as is the case in some major forms of Kabbalah. Neither is the Torah seen as the instrument by which one transcends a certain common or ordinary experience in order to attain experience of a divinity that is totally divorced from the text or that is ultimately achieved by leaving the Torah behind or by experiencing the Author without the text. Rather, the two—Torah and God—are conceived of as profoundly intertwined. God's revelation depends upon someone's ability to see Him within parts of the texts that were previously (before the revelation) opaque. Therefore, the hasidic discussions adduced above do not follow a theory of a lost text or of a portion of it but, instead, see the Divine as actually standing beyond the revealed aspects of the written Torah. In theosophical terminology, the revealed Torah is identical with the third *sefirah*, *Binah*, while the Torah to be revealed in the future is identical with the second *sefirah*, *Hokhmah*.<sup>21</sup>

Is there any significant difference between Scholem's interpretation of this material and the one that I have suggested above? In my opinion the answer is certainly yes. The key difference is located in the understanding of the status of the Torah text. Scholem's interpretation stems from his framing of the passage as part of the antinomian tradition of *Sefer ha-Temunah*, mentioned immediately before and after the above quote, which has the effect of intimating that the hasidic master assumes that the perfect Torah will only be revealed in the messianic future.<sup>22</sup> Scholem, in fact, goes still further and makes it quite clear that "*unquestionably* this doctrine left room for all manner of *heretical* variants and developments. Once it was supposed that a revelation of new letters or books could change the whole outward manifestation of the Torah without touching its true essence, almost everything was possible."<sup>23</sup>

The excitement of the modern reader to learn more about the "heretical variants" is, however, not quite satisfied by Scholem's footnote, where, quite surprisingly—and unconvincingly—only the illustrious name of Cagliostro is mentioned as a source justifying this radical understanding of Jewish mysticism.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, in contradistinction to Scholem's claim, the hasidic master does not speak about a change in the "whole outward manifestation of the Torah," namely, an ontic change of the founding document—implicitly related to apocalypticism—but, rather, about an epistemological change that opens the eyes, or the hearts, of the people. Is such a change something to be

deferred to another eon or restricted to the advent of the Messiah? Is the life of a hasidic mystic one that is lived in deferment, as Scholem would say?<sup>25</sup> Has the mystic to pay a “price,” as Scholem describes it, when he venerates the given form of the canonical text or of the tradition? Or is there a way to attain, from the perspective of the mystic, even in our day, an epistemological transformation that will enable someone to contemplate the luminosity of God without smelting down the sacred text?<sup>26</sup> Is the mystic’s capacity to read between the lines as the ultimate space of meaning, as Walter Benjamin puts it, not to be adopted as a better interpretation than the assumption that the very structure of the Torah will be changed in the messianic future?<sup>27</sup>

The answer to these questions insofar as the interpretation of the above passage is concerned should be sought, first and foremost, in the teachings of R. Levi Isaac, a hasidic thinker renowned for his direct attachment to God. An inspection of the references to the expression *Behirut ha-Bore*, “the luminosity of the Creator,” in his work reveals instances where the ancient mystics are described as being able to transcend the limited luminosity found in this world after the act of divine contraction (*tzimtzum*) and reach the unlimited luminosity that precedes the moment of contraction (*tzimtzum*).<sup>28</sup> Even more significant is the fact that elsewhere in the *Kedushat Levi* R. Levi Isaac identifies the white letters of the Torah and the parchment with the *‘Ayin*, a term that literally means “nothingness” but which serves in both kabbalistic theosophical literature and hasidic sources as a reference to a very high, or even the highest, divine realm.<sup>29</sup> R. Levi Isaac goes on to suggest that the righteous already have access to this divine realm here and now.<sup>30</sup>

I would therefore propose that we read the passage adduced in the name of R. Levi Isaac of Berditchev not as a statement about a definitive deferment but, instead, as an invitation to the elite to attain now what all other Jews will attain only in the eschaton. Further, I would note that this reading is supported by and is consonant with other relevant statements in early Hasidism where the messianic experience is understood as being attained even in the present.<sup>31</sup> If this interpretation is accepted, then R. Levi Isaac’s teaching does not open the gate to “all manner of heretical statements”; neither does it involve a change in the “outward manifestation of the Torah.” I wonder also whether, as Scholem has put it elsewhere, “the sacred text loses its shape and takes a new one for the mystic.”<sup>32</sup> In place of Scholem’s reading I would opt for one that argues for an epistemic change in the reader and one that invites much more intense contemplations of the depth of the text of the Torah as it is. The reading of the Torah in a mystical manner is conceived of as an experience that is reminiscent of Martin Buber’s *gegenwartiges Urphaenomenon*.

Shifting Scholem's emphasis on the ontic and messianic transformation of the canonical text to the assumption just stated that the gist of the hasidic text is the spiritual transformation of the recipient of the revelation, I would contend that the Torah still retains its shape but opens its blank parts to a process of more sublime decoding. By putting the accent on this issue I believe that we are coming closer to the main concern of Hasidism, namely, the deepening of the spiritual life of the devotee. In Hasidism in general, and in R. Levi Isaac's generation in particular, we know about the basic lack of distinction between the encompassing and the inner lights, a fact that can be perceived by the transformation of the mystic's inner capacities.<sup>33</sup> A long discussion that buttresses this emphasis on both the centrality of an epistemic change and the availability of such a change in the present is found in a book that will be quoted several times in the following pages, *Toledot 'Aharon*, authored by R. Aharon of Zhitomir, the disciple of R. Levi Isaac. The assumption made in this work is that there are two ways of studying the Torah: the first, with an intellect or a "great intellect"; the second, without intellect. Study with an "intellect" is related to causing the return of the letters to the primordially of the intellect, on the one hand, and the return of the combinations of the letters of the studied Torah to their primordial state, where they were white.<sup>34</sup> There is nothing that is specifically messianic in this discussion but, rather, a contention is advanced that perfect study will retrace the primordial Torah, described as consisting of white letters. The perfect study is "to bring the letters of the Torah to the primordial whiteness."<sup>35</sup>

Thus, it is not a transcending of the black in order to meet another, more sublime entity but, rather, the elevation of the black to its supernal source, in the vein of a more general mystical demand widespread in Hasidism. Or to put it in more semiotic terms, the written Torah, with its semantic aspects, stems from another realm, which includes a surplus of meaning, the white letters, the knowledge of whose language adds to the written—black—document without detracting anything from it. Significantly, even when R. Aharon invokes the messianic nature of the revelation of the white letters, he immediately writes that "even now, when a righteous person pronounces the letters in a state of devotion. . . . he unites the letters to the light of the Infinite . . . and ascends higher than all the worlds to the place where the letters are white and are not combined and then he can perform there whatever combination he wants."<sup>36</sup>

Also, it should be noted that the emphasis on the possibility of obtaining the experience of a direct encounter with the divine, pointed out by the luminosity of the experience, does greater justice to R. Levi Isaac's thought. R. Levi Isaac, for example, asked the following question: "How is it possible to attain the supernal luminosity

which has not yet been limited within the worlds? [The answer is] By means of enthusiasm [*hitlahavut*] man is capable of cleaving to the Creator, blessed be His name, [and] by means of that enthusiasm he will reach the supernal luminosity which has not yet limited itself within the [lower] worlds."<sup>37</sup>

The last two quotes allow a plausible solution to the quandary concerning the role of messianism in the revelation of the white letters: mystics are capable of attaining in the here and now the kind of experience that will be achieved by all in the eschaton. Even now, through study involving the "great intellect," there are spiritual means by which to anticipate the "sublime" understanding of the Torah. This answer is relevant both for a theory of reading in Hasidism and for an understanding of the reader's role. The self-transformation, in this case the resort to enthusiasm, is the clue for the ascent to a contact with the highest level of the divinity. We may infer from this instance a possible way of understanding the ideal reading of the Torah, for in both cases the concept of divine luminosity is involved. That is, from here we learn that disclosure of the hidden dimension involves an experience of self-transformation that culminates in a cleaving to God. The clue for reading the invisible Torah is not lost; neither is it necessarily waiting for the advent of the Messiah. Mystics are often stubborn individuals who invest all their energy in discovering clues. Moreover, I would say that the doors of spiritual understanding and contemplation have been, at least in Jewish mysticism, imagined to be basically open since from the very beginning the clues were created using the mold of the lock.<sup>38</sup>

Let us reflect for a moment on the additional implications of the above hasidic passages, which follow the way opened by the sixteenth-century kabbalist R. David ibn Avi Zimra: that the white spaces are either identical with or pointing toward the highest realm within the divine world, namely, the *'Em Sof*.<sup>39</sup> Just as the white parts of the text are statistically more extensive than the black ones, so the infinite is more extensive than the revealed divinity.

The question may be asked: What is the relation between the white and the black aspects according to R. Levi Isaac's and his student's opinion? In one of his discussions R. Levi Isaac claims that "the letters point to the influx of *'Elohim* within the world of nature."<sup>40</sup> The affinity between the world of Nature—*teva*`—and the name *'Elohim* is widespread in Hasidism, and it has something to do with a view of this divine name as reflecting a stage of divine contraction.<sup>41</sup> Elsewhere he describes the "shape of the letters [that point to] the manner in which the intellectual [entities] and the influx [descending from] the Lord of the Lords, operate within the corporeality and nature."<sup>42</sup>

The black letters are thus seen to function as pipes or channels for the descent of the divinity within this world. According to another

text, however, in the case of the righteous person these letters serve as the starting point for his ascent to the spiritual realms.<sup>43</sup> These two movements are mentioned together in connection with the righteous person in the context of the description of the letters.<sup>44</sup> Thus, the two aspects of the text reflect the two basic motions that, when understood as a whole, constitute what I propose to call the mystical-magical model, namely, a comprehensive paradigm that combines the process of the mystical ascent to God with the descent of the mystic's soul that brings down the divine influence.<sup>45</sup> So, for example, we read: "There are those who serve God with their human intellect and others whose gaze is fixed as if on Nought, and this is impossible without the divine help. . . . He who is granted this supreme degree, with divine help, to contemplate the Nought, then his intellect is effaced and he is like a dumb man, because his intellect is obliterated . . . but when he returns from such a contemplation to the essence of [his] intellect, he finds it full of influx."<sup>46</sup>

According to other passages in *Kedushat Levi*, contemplation of divine luminosity causes loss of the sense of identity and reality, exactly as in the case of the contemplation of the Nought. *'Ayin* stands, therefore, not for the absence of God, just as the luminosity of the white letters is not a hole or a gap, but as the representation of His immediate presence to the consciousness of the contemplator. An interesting parallel to some of the ideas in the above quotes is also found in the writing of a disciple of R. Levi Isaac, R. Aharon of Zhitomir, who cites his master as follows:

There are two kinds of righteous persons: there is a righteous who receives luminosity from the letters of Torah and prayer and there is another righteous, that is greater, who brings the luminosity to the letters from above, despite the fact that the letters are in the supernal world, when the great righteous brings new luminosity to the world, this luminosity cannot come to the world but by its being clothed in the letters . . . and when the luminosity comes down the letters fly upwards whereas the luminosity remains here below. And the [great] degree of this righteous is connected to recitation of the speeches with all his power and with dedication and with all the two hundred and forty eight limbs he comes to each and every word that he recites, he brings [down] luminosity . . . and performs a unification of the Holy One Blessed be He and the *Shekhinah* and by means of this he brings luminosity to the letters and from the letters to the entire world, this only when there are recipients capable of receiving the luminosity. However, if there is no recipient below, the righteous himself has to receive the luminosity arriving to the letters of the [pronounced] word.<sup>47</sup>

What is fascinating in this passage is the fact that the actualization of the written Torah in a vocal manner induces, rather explicitly, the descent of the luminosity of the supernal Torah. Thus the ideal and the real forms of the Torah are not in conflict but in concert. The ideal man, the righteous, causes the descent of the ideal by performing the

actual. The divine luminosity is transformed into a sort of energy that is brought down and distributed by the righteous to the recipients. In fact, if my reading of R. Levi Isaac's approach to the white letters is correct, they should not be understood as reflecting a sense of absolute transcendence not to be attained during the mystical experiences available in the present but, rather, as a possible promise for an active mystic in the present. It is not the expectation of a future change in the structure of the canonical text that will be induced by the Messiah alone that is meant but, rather, an urge to ascend to the whiteness in order to transform it into a power from which this world will benefit in the present. In support of this analysis of the white letters, let me adduce one further passage attributed to R. Levi Isaac by his disciple, R. Aharon of Zhitomir:

Sometimes, the letters rule over man, and sometimes man rules over the letters. This means that when man utters speeches with power and devotion, the speeches are then ruling over him, because the light within the letters confer on him vitality and delight so that he may utter speeches to the Creator, but this man cannot abolish anything bad, by performing other combinations [of letters]. But when someone utters speeches with devotion and brings all his power within the letters and joins to the light of the Infinite, blessed be He, that dwells within the letters, this person is higher than the letters and he combines letters as he likes . . . and he will be capable of drawing down the influx, the blessing and the good things.<sup>48</sup>

In many hasidic texts the light of the infinite is not conceived of as an absolutely transcendental realm, as is sometimes the case in the Cordoverian and Lurianic types of Kabbalah, but is seen rather as a level of reality that is open to human experience in the present, as we saw in the first quote above from R. Mordekhai of Chernobyl. This light is found within letters, and the mystic can approach it and utilize it. Thus, according to the last passage, the light of the infinite is not contemplated but is, rather, exploited in order to bring down supernal power. In another quote, attributed to R. Levi Isaac, the process of interpretation of the Bible is described as bringing down the influx.<sup>49</sup>

To return to the last material quoted above, according to the hasidic text there are righteous individuals whose study and prayer are done in a routine manner and are therefore dominated by the canonical texts. These texts include the power of the infinite, which have an effect upon human experience—the speech of the Creator and its recitation—but this type of passive involvement is not a creative activity. The speaker is found within the net of canonized language and is defined by it. However, it is possible to avoid this net by intense linguistic activity that consists of mystical devotion and magical acts, referred to here as the process of combinations of letters in new forms.

Escaping the normal form of language is related to escaping, for a while, from ordinary human experience and even dominating it.

This downward move, however, which involves a certain use of the power in order to bring an even greater influx from above to below, is not the sole result of the cleaving to the infinite light within the letters. According to another passage, one dealing expressly with the writing of the Torah in the form of black letters on white fire, and which is even more pertinent for our discussion, this devotion is described as enabling the mystic to break the external cover of the letters in order to reach the internal light, an attainment that is described as escaping the state of *Tzimtzum*.<sup>50</sup> This transcendence of the state of limitation is related to the contemplation of supernal lights: "When someone cleaves to the light of the Infinite, blessed be He, that dwells within the letters, out of his devotion, each and every moment that he looks [or contemplates] the bigger lights and to the luminosity [stemming from] the light of the Infinite is the essence of delight."<sup>51</sup>

In another context, mentioned already above, the act of tracing the letters to their primordial state enables the mystic to combine them differently and thus to perform miracles.<sup>52</sup> Like R. Levi Isaac's "enthusiasm," his disciple's "devotion" opens the way to direct contact with the supernal worlds or, as we have seen above, with the combinations of the white letters that make up the primordial Torah. Unlike some modern literary critics who would emphasize the importance of the absent or the omitted aspects of the text, aspects that are required in order to understand it, R. Levi Isaac would say that the divine text as it is now available does not omit anything, that it is perfect as it is. The sole problem for fathoming the text is the development of the capacity to read, in our present circumstances, what is found within the text. It is not the eclipse of the author that creates the possibility of multiple interpretations of the canonical text, or its elliptic form, but, rather, its inherent fullness with the presence of the divine, which confers upon it an unusual semantic pregnancy.

#### WHITE LETTERS AND THE CLAIM OF AN EXPERIENCE OF PLENITUDE

This plenitude of the text symbolized by white letters is, however, rather vague and is not translated in detail by particular secrets, as is the case in the earlier theosophical Kabbalah when dealing, for example, in *Sefer ha-Temunah*, with each of the letters or in the case of the ten supernal, white hyper-*sefirot* known as the ten *Tzahtzahot* or *Tzihztzuhim*.<sup>53</sup> Not that the concept of the secret is totally absent in the

context of the lights or the luminosity related to the white letters.<sup>54</sup> However, in the case of Hasidism it seems that no specific code had been offered in order to decipher the specific meaning of the white letters. Manifestation remained compact within proclamation, to borrow a Christian theological idea. The medieval process of arcanization has been neutralized in these hasidic texts in favor of a more emotional and devotional experience. Or to formulate this hermeneutical move in Buber's terms, Hasidism has de-schematized what he has called the kabbalistic mystery.<sup>55</sup> It is of paramount importance to emphasize that the blank letters were not decoded but were left, as in some ancient mystical texts, as the divine background of the revealed Torah. Reaching them amounts to transcending the details of the written Torah and even of the kabbalistic secrets. It is a more unified vision that is far removed from Maimonides's philosophical-political esotericism or from oral pieces of information that were handed down secretly at the beginning of Kabbalah in the context of the biblical and rabbinic commandments. Neither are these blank letters related to the numerous technical treatments of Luria's Kabbalah. The meaning of the sacred text is conceived of as being understood only if experienced. Indeed, this experiential dimension is well expressed by two hasidic masters, R. Menahem Mendel of Premislany and R. Qalonimus Qalman Epstein of Krakow, who negated the importance of secrecy in the kabbalistic tradition, arguing that this lore is based upon an experiential attitude.<sup>56</sup> According to these masters, understanding some "profound" aspect of a text presupposes an experience of encountering a certain aspect of the divine author. However, for the hasidic masters, it was less the content of the revelation that counted than the inner transformation that brought the mystic to such an experience. The theme of the white letters does not insist upon the importance of the communication of a transcendental truth, as is the case of *Sefer ha-Temunah*, but, instead, seeks to trigger a spiritual change in the psyche of the elite.

#### ON WHITE LETTERS AND MODERN HERMENEUTICS

R. Levi Isaac's view regarding the white letters has been quoted by three major contemporary thinkers, all of them drawing on Scholem's study on the Torah in Jewish mysticism. Influenced by Scholem's approach to the somehow dubious status of the present biblical text, Jacques Derrida has described Kabbalah as evincing "a kind of atheism" because of its emphases on textuality and plurivocality.<sup>57</sup> He was particularly attracted to this topic because of his interest in Stephane Mallarmé's writings, though I would say that Derrida differs from

Mallarme on a crucial issue discussed here, namely, that while the poet introduces the category of mystery as crucial for the understanding of a poetic text, Derrida strongly distances himself from such a move. Interestingly, Derrida, at least once, associates Mallarme's view of what he calls an "orphanic explication of earth," found in his *Autobiographie*, to Abraham Abulafia's kabbalistic theory of combinations of letters—but not to R. Levi Isaac's view of blank spaces in a text.<sup>58</sup>

Let me return to Derrida's description of R. Levi Isaac's view as having something to do with a kind of atheism. Atheism is characterized in this context by a strong textuality or plurivocality, and this is a point that is not explicated by Derrida, at least not in this context. Ignorant as I am of any other clarification of this topic elsewhere in Derrida's vast opus, I indulge in a speculation that religiosity, or theology, is implicitly interpreted here as subscribing to a monosemic reading or to a tendency to speak about an abstract deity that may not be intrinsically or organically connected to a text. However, such a contention decides a priori what forms of theology and textuality are conceived of as religious or atheistic, without allowing the exponents of those concepts to define themselves as either religious or atheistic. I would say, for example, that a text-centered community might be more religiously oriented than one that is not or that a polysemic text fits the belief in an infinite author, as we have seen elsewhere, as well as a modern atheistic theory of dissemination.<sup>59</sup> Religion is certainly notoriously difficult to define, and the above criterion is hardly a salient one.

Another reference to the alleged "atheistic" nature of R. Levi Isaac's passage is found in one of Umberto Eco's studies. After a long quote from Derrida's book *Glyph*, Eco writes as follows:

The text as symbol is no longer read in order to find in it a truth that lies *outside*: the only truth (that is, the old kabbalistic God) is the very play of deconstruction. The ultimate truth is that the text is a mere play of differences and displacements. Rabbi Levi Isaac said that: "also the white, the spaces in the scroll of the Torah, consist of letters, only that we are not able to read them as we read black letters. But, in the Messianic Age, God will also reveal to us the white of the Torah, whose letters have become invisible to us, and that is what is meant by the statement about the 'new Torah.'" . . . [T]he Lacanian acknowledgement of the autonomy of the symbolic as the chain of the signifiers, by inspiring the new deconstructionist practices, has now allowed the new and atheistic mystics of the godless drift, to rewrite indefinitely, at every reading, the new Torah.<sup>60</sup>

There can be no doubt that Eco relies on Scholem when he quotes the passage by the hasidic teacher. However, I am not quite sure whether he was aware of Derrida's discussion in *Dissemination* when he described the passage from R. Levi Isaac as reminding him of an atheistic approach or as having a "godless drift." The resemblance between the attitudes of the two scholars to the hasidic master is,

nevertheless, quite remarkable, though their evaluation is, in fact, diametrically opposed. In my opinion it stems from both of them having accepted Scholem's understanding of the hasidic master as someone who embraced, at least implicitly, antinomian views. In any case, Eco's concept of rewriting seems to reflect the view that Scholem attributes to R. Levi Isaac as to the possibility of the emergence of a new text. Thus, the traditional phrase "new Torah" at the end of the above passage became a symbol for the result of the process of reading texts anew.

However, if for Derrida the term *atheism* is a rather positive designation, for Eco it stands for quite a negative quality. In a manner reminiscent of the confession of another "Levi," one of the main protagonists of Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum*, "Diotalevi," meaning an indefinite sort of semiosis, is described as deleterious.<sup>61</sup> Without a referential mode of designation, as the white is implicitly conceived of, the white letters may appear as godless. The difference between my understanding of the hasidic texts as referring to white letters as divine and the modern interpretations of these letters as conveying some form of godlessness is evident and significant. I prefer to read R. Levi Isaac's view as part of the hasidic tradition, which is less apocalyptic than the kabbalistic tradition represented by the *Book of Temunah*, which is much more antinomian and apocalyptic. Though the second type of decoding is not an aberrant one, since *Sefer ha-Temunah* was available to the hasidic master, it is, philologically speaking, much less plausible. After all, this kabbalistic book, though speaking about the shape of letters, deals solely with the black ones as symbols for the *sefirotic* realm, an issue that is marginalized in the hasidic tradition.

Last but not least, there is also evidence that a third major contemporary thinker, George Steiner, has addressed R. Levi Isaac's view, again describing it as heretical: "There is kabbalistic speculation, to which I will return, about a day on which words will shake off 'the burden of having to mean' and will be only themselves, blank and replete as stone."<sup>62</sup> Indeed, at the very end of the book from which I draw this quotation Steiner returns to this vision of the non-semantic fullness of language at the eschaton: "The Kabbalah also knows of a more esoteric possibility. It records the conjecture, no doubt heretical, that there shall be a day when translation is not only unnecessary but inconceivable. Words will rebel against man. . . . They will become only themselves, and as dead stones in our mouths."<sup>63</sup>

The motif of the blankness of letters in the time of the eschaton, referred to here by Steiner, almost certainly stems from Scholem's discussion of R. Levi Isaac, and again the alleged "heresy" has, for emphasis, been put in relief: "no doubt heretical." Blankness is part of

a more complex constellation of ideas that are very important for Steiner, ideas in which the dimension of silence in discourse is connected to the blank parts of the text as part of the indefinite and thus the more open vision of communication.<sup>64</sup> In a way, Scholem and, following him, Derrida and Steiner represent a continuation of an interwar approach found in some Jewish writers and intellectuals, especially Franz Kafka. I propose to describe them as “the desolates.”<sup>65</sup> Dealing with the concept of white letters in a way that has been disassociated from its original context in the thought and writings of a specific hasidic school, as well as the life of a specific author, the emphasis has been shifted from the confidence of a traditional elite in the possibility of achieving a maximum type of experience—according to its religious *imaginaire*—to its diametric opposite, namely, the deferment to an indefinite future of such an experience of plenitude—insofar as the hasidic texts are concerned—and then to some form of antinomianism and desolation in the modern and postmodern *imaginaire*. That this desolation, related in Kafka and Scholem to a sense of life lived in deferment, became a blueprint by which to understand both Kabbalah and Hasidism is part of the ambiguous legacy of a number of significant modern Jewish intellectuals, rather than a balanced position that helps clarify the views of traditional thinkers.<sup>66</sup> Appropriating the meaning of earlier traditions in an anachronistic manner, as if they reflect or corroborate new intellectual sensibilities—namely, some form of antinomianism or deconstruction—is possible only if one ignores both the personality of the original mystical authors and many of their relevant statements.

The white spaces of the Torah scroll were not considered by the hasidic teachers to be holes or gaps, negative features inherent in the canonical books to be filled with new sorts of content by the readers. On the contrary, they constitute the very divine presence found within the sacred scriptures and, according to the traditional view, found there alone. However, modern scholars have interpreted these hasidic views differently, that is, as being pertinent for any text, by using modern sensibilities to decode them. Thus, while the traditional teachers emphasized the uniqueness of a certain text, modern scholars work with universalistic assumptions. Some of these modern positions, which have been discussed above, are certainly fascinating, though less plausible, and, in my opinion, were undreamed of by the original author himself. R. Levi Isaac of Berdichev, who was so “godfull” in his thought, is now seen as having taught, inadvertently to be sure, a “godless drift.” Or to put it in different terms, the fascination of modern thinkers with the blank letters has induced a state of obliviousness to the black ones; that is, it has caused a forgetting of the precise circumstances under which the original text that is the subject of analysis

came into being and taught its message. That is to say, the hasidic texts emerged from and were read in a specific society, just as modern literary critiques are the result of another quite specific, though very different, type of Western social and intellectual environment. Thus the latter's misreading of the former so dramatically is just one more case of the phenomenon that Harold Bloom has called "misprison."<sup>67</sup> No doubt, modern philosophers of text—though scholars—are at the same time strong readers no less than the kabbalists and hasidic masters were.<sup>68</sup> They comment, however, at least in our case, not on the canonical writings of the hasidic sources themselves but, rather, on scholarly analyses—or perhaps scholarly opinions—extracted from short statements originating in hasidic sources that are detached from their wider, original, conceptual context. Moreover, this scholarly analysis has been mistakenly canonized and has been understood as a statement that authentically reflects traditional views on the nature of the sacred text. My analysis here is an attempt to understand how numerous contemporary commentators on Scholem's analysis have reflected Scholem's strong commentary on the hasidic texts in question, while also recognizing that they radicalized what was only tentatively suggested in Scholem's analysis, by transforming R. Levi Isaac into some form of atheist. And this because while for the eminent scholar of Jewish mysticism it was the subversive drama of transforming canonical texts into something else that attracted his attention as part of the construction of a countertradition, the literary critiques here referred to had another agenda. They were not concerned with the specifics of the hasidic views but, rather, used the hasidic teacher as a marker for a strong reader who emphasizes the gaps in the texts not in order to encounter the author but to exercise the potential found in any text as text. R. Levi Isaac became an allegory for modern theories of texts that mitigate, or even exclude, both the author and God from their interpretive horizon.

No doubt, the hasidic understanding of the blank spaces, or what R. Levi Isaac called the white letters, is no more than an invention that has nothing to do with the ancient structure of the scroll of the Torah. The hasidic view discussed above is part of an attempt to confer a special status on a sacred book, as much of previous Jewish literature had already done in many other ways. From this point of view, the modern scholars dealing with the nature of the text and its blank parts are closer to the reality of the biblical text than the hasidic teacher. However, these scholars also invented textual meanings insofar as they attributed modern sensibilities related to absence and negativity to a traditional author who had never imagined, never thought of, these possibilities. Therefore, modern scholarly readings have distorted a premodern text. Part of the problem lies in the assumption that modern

theories of text not only address the nature of the text per se but also make possible the discovery of modern literary theories as if they were already articulated by religious thinkers centuries beforehand. By claiming, in contrast, that there is an important historical gap between the traditional author and the modern critic, I do not wish to create too artificial a rupture between the traditional author and the modern literary theorist. Significant continuities may exist, but the existence of such continuities has to be demonstrated convincingly.

HEBREW UNIVERSITY OF JERUSALEM

NOTES

To Shiraz-Elijah, a descendant of R. Levi Isaac of Berditchev

1. See, e.g., Erich Neumann, "Mystical Man," in *The Mystic Vision: Papers from the Eranos Yearbooks*, (ed.) J. Campbell (Princeton, 1982), pp. 375–415; Siegmund Hurwitz, "Archtypische Motive in der Chassidischen Mystik," in *Zeitlose Dokumente des Seele* (Zurich, 1952), pp. 123–212; and Micha Ankori, *The Heart and the Spring: A Comparative Study in Hassidism and Depth Psychology* (Heb.; Tel Aviv, 1991). For the deep impact of Hasidism on the type of psychology recently shaped by Rotenberg, see, e.g., Mordekhai Rotenberg, *Dialogue with Deviance: The Hasidic Ethic and the Theory of Social Contraction* (Philadelphia, 1983); and Mordekhai Rotenberg, *Dia-logo Therapy, Psychoanalysis and Pardes* (New York, 1991).

2. See, e.g., Walter T. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy* (New York, 1960), pp. 106–107.

3. See, meanwhile, Moshe Idel, *Absorbing Perfections: Kabbalah and Interpretation* (New Haven, 2002), especially pp. 470–481.

4. See Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, p. 516n45.

5. See M. Idel, *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic* (Albany, 1995), pp. 172–185; and Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, pp. 190–201.

6. See M. Idel, "Die laut gelesene Tora, Stimmengemeinschaft in der juedischen Mystik," in *Zwischen Rauschen und Offenbarung, Zur Kultur- und Mediengeschichte der Stimme*, (eds.) Th. Macho and S. Weigel (Berlin, 2002), pp. 19–53; and M. Idel, "The Voiced Text of the Torah," *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte*, Vol. 68 (1994), pp. 145–166.

7. *Liqqutei Torah* (Benei Berak, 1983), fol. 29d.

8. See Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, pp. 45–59.

9. Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, trans. R. Manheim (New York, 1969), pp. 81–84. On this master, see Samuel H. Dresner, *World of a Hasidic Master: Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev* (Northvale, N.J., 1987).

10. For the different ancient treatments of the new Torah, see W. D. Davies, *The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount* (Cambridge, 1964), pp. 154–196. For a medieval kabbalistic discussion on the new Torah, see Amos Goldreich, "Clarifications of the Self-Perception of the Author of *Tiqqunei Zohar*" (Heb.),

in *Massu'ot, Studies in Kabbalistic Literature and Jewish Philosophy in Memory of Prof. Ephraim Gottlieb*, (eds.) M. Oron and A. Goldreich (Jerusalem, 1994), p. 476; and for Hasidism, see Shaul Maggid, *Hasidism on the Margin* (Madison, Wisc., 2003), pp. 142, 321–322nn8, 11. One mystic who resorted to the concept of the “new Torah” is the late thirteenth-century Rabbalist Abraham Abulafia. See his commentary on *Sefer ha-Haftarah*, MS. Roma-Angelica 38, fol. 37a.

11. *Imrei Tzaddiqim* (Zhitomir, Ukraine, 1900), fol. 5b. On “more than Ezekiel has seen,” see Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, p. 506n75. Here a different translation of a larger portion of the discussion, which has already been analyzed by G. Scholem (*On the Kabbalah*, pp. 81–82), has been provided. See also Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim, Early Masters* (New York, 1964), p. 232. Scholem’s citation and analysis informed many literary critiques, as we shall see below. See also the citation of this passage, plausibly from Scholem, in Raphael Patai, *The Messiah Texts* (Detroit, 1988), p. 257.

12. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah*, p. 82.

13. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah*, p. 81. He writes that “this notion [of the book of *Temunah*] of the invisible parts of the Torah which will one day be made manifest endured for centuries in a number of variants and was taken into the Hasidic tradition.”

14. For a somewhat more moderate exposition of the topic of the invisible letters in *Sefer ha-Temunah*, see Gershom Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, (ed.) R. J. Z. Werblowsky, trans. A. Arkush (Princeton, 1987), pp. 466–467.

15. *Kedushat Levi* (Jerusalem, 1993), p. 343.

16. *Maggid Devarav Le-Ya`aqov*, (ed.) R. Schatz-Uffenheimer (Jerusalem, 1976), pp. 17–18. See also the discussion of the same author in *Maggid Devarav Le-Ya`aqov*, pp. 201–203 and especially p. 326; and see also R. Aharon of Zhitomir, *Toledot 'Aharon* (Lemberg, Ukraine, 1985), I, fol. 5c, where an interesting passage on the forefathers is found. See also R. Dov Baer of Medzerich, *'Or Torah* (Jerusalem, 1968), p. 47, where the phrase *behirut ha-Torah*, “the luminosity of the Torah,” occurs. On the revelations of the secrets of the Torah in messianic times, in the context of a discussion of two fires, see *Sefer ha-Meshiv* (already anonymous in the late fifteenth century), in the passage quoted in Gershom Scholem, “The Maggid of Rabbi Joseph Taitatchek and the Revelations Attributed to Him” (Heb.), *Sefunot*, Vol. 11 (1971–1978), p. 100. I hope to discuss elsewhere the possibility that the view of the Great Maggid may have been influenced by the views of R. Moses Hayyim Luzzatto (Ramhal), who was fond of the expression “new Torah.”

See R. Dov Baer, *'Or Torah*, p. 48, where the luminosity of the creator is mentioned; as well as the quote attributed to R. Barukh of Medzibush, the grandson of the Besht, in *Botzina' di-Nehora' ha-Shalem* (N.P., 1985), p. 111. See also Idel, *Absorbing Perceptions*, pp. 505n72, 547n189. *Me-`atzmiyuti* is an interpretation of *me-`itti*.

17. See, e.g., R. Isaiah Horowitz, *The Two Tables of the Covenant* (Jerusalem, 1969), I, fol. 60a.

18. See *Sha`arei ha-`Avodah, Sha`ar Torah w-Mitzvot* (Sklov, Russia, 1821), chap. 9, fol. 14b. On this passage and others relevant to its understanding, see Rachel Elijor, *The Theory of Divinity of Hasidut Habad, Second Generation* (Heb.; Jerusalem, 1982), pp. 357–358. I cannot enter here into the question of the

precise sources, found in both kabbalistic and nonkabbalistic books, dealing with the two types of letters but, rather, must restrict my analyses to the specific background necessary in order to better understand R. Levi Isaac's passages.

19. See *Kedushat Levi*, p. 183.

20. *Kedushat Levi*, pp. 327–328. Interestingly enough, this passage is closest to the presentation of one of the most learned among the kabbalists belonging to the camp of the *Mitnaggedim*; see R. Isaac Aizik Haver, 'Or Torah, in *Amudei ha-Torah*, (ed.) R. Shmuel Mayevski (Jerusalem, 1971), pp. 219–220.

On the relation between letters, lights, and secrets in thirteenth-century Kabbalah in the context of the contemplation of the Torah scroll, see Elliot R. Wolfson, *Through a Speculum that Shines* (Princeton, 1995), pp. 375–376 and the pertinent footnotes; as well as Elliot R. Wolfson, "From Sealed Book, to Open Text: Time, Memory and Narrativity in Kabbalistic Hermeneutics," in *Interpreting Judaism in a Postmodern Age*, (ed.) Steven Kepnes (New York, 1996), p. 153.

For "what has been written," see *Mekhilta'*, Beshalah, II. A list of mainly Rabbinic sources dealing with this issue is found in Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Theology of Ancient Judaism* (Heb.; London, 1962), Vol. 1, pp. 283–284.

21. R. Aharon, *Toledot 'Aharon*, I, fol. 27a. See also a much earlier view found in *Sefer ha-Meshiv*, in a passage printed in Scholem, "The Maggid of Rabbi Joseph Taitatchek and the Revelations Attributed to Him," p. 100.

22. As to the contention of antinomianism in this book, see Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, pp. 467–468, 472.

23. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah*, p. 82, emphasis added.

24. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah*, p. 82n2.

25. See Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York, 1972), p. 35. See also Scholem's discussion of the lost keys to the understanding of the Torah in *On the Kabbalah*, pp. 12–13. This is indeed quite an ancient motif as it appears in the *Gospel of Thomas*, para. 39, and in the *Pseudo-Clementines Recognitions*, 2.30.1, in both cases in connection with the Pharisees. I hope to return to this motif in a separate study. Cf., meanwhile, Guy G. Stroumsa, *Hidden Wisdom* (Leiden, 1996), p. 125n73. However, for a hasidic master, the assumption is that the "key of the Torah"—*Mafteah ha-Torah*—is always available to one of the righteous of the generation. See the late collection of legends *Gedolim Ma'asei Tzaddiqim*, where the R. Abraham Yehoshu'a Heschel of Apta is reported to have identified that righteous with the Maggid of Zlotchov. See also the quote from R. Nahman of Braslav in Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, pp. 196, 200. On the study of Torah as a paradisiacal experience, see R. Ze'ev Wolf of Zhitomir, 'Or ha-Me'ir (Perizek, Poland, 1815), fol. 3bc, 4b. About "inner and external keys" that are related to the divine names, see the introduction in *Tiqunei Zohar*, (ed.) R. Margaliot (Jerusalem, 1978), fol. 5a. For more on keys, see also note 65.

26. See George Steiner, *After Babel* (Oxford, 1975), p. 65.

27. See Scholem, *On the Kabbalah*, pp. 12–13. The rhetoric of the "price" is one of the most fascinating examples of Scholem's axiology. Cf. Scholem's claim that Hasidism paid a price when embracing, according to his judgment, a nonapocalyptic approach to messianism in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*,

p. 35. See a critique of this approach in M. Idel, *Messianic Mystics* (New Haven, 1998), pp. 276–277, 292.

28. See, e.g., *Kedushat Levi*, pp. 104–105, 145, 230. See also R. Dov Baer of Mezeritch, *'Or Torah*, pp. 8, 47.

29. *Kedushat Levi*, p. 350.

30. See, e.g., R. Dov Baer of Medzerich, *'Or Torah*, pp. 47–48; and Idel, *Hasidism*, pp. 117–120.

31. See Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, pp. 229–234.

32. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah*, p. 12.

33. See Rachel Elijor, *The Theory of Divinity in HaBaD Hasidism* (Heb.; Jerusalem, 1982), p. 34n44; and Arthur Green, *Devotion and Commandment* (Cincinnati, 1989), pp. 62–64.

34. R. Aharon, *Toledot 'Aharon*, I, fol. 27cd; see also II, fol. 1a. On the Hasidic concept of the primordially of the intellect, see the important contribution by Gershom Scholem, *Devarim be-Go* (Heb.; Tel Aviv, 1976), pp. 351–360. As in some of the sources quoted by Scholem in this book, the “primordial intellect” is identified with the *sefirah Hokhmah* and the primordial Torah. See, e.g., R. Aharon, *Toledot 'Aharon*, I, fols. 27a, 27cd. On the theories of combinations of letters and the emergence of the canonical text, see Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, pp. 352–389.

35. R. Aharon, *Toledot 'Aharon*, I, fol. 27d.

36. R. Aharon, *Toledot 'Aharon*, I, fol. 18c. Two different issues that can be described as indeterminate can be discerned here: the whiteness and the possibility to combine letters. However, this is not a simple invitation to create new meanings by interpretation but, rather, to create a certain combination that already exists in order to obtain a practical, namely, a magical, result. See also note 34 above.

37. *Kedushat Levi*, p. 145. For other examples dealing with R. Levi Isaac's claim that the mystic is capable of contemplating divinity, see Idel, *Hasidism*, pp. 118–120.

38. Cf. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah*, pp. 12–13.

39. See Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, p. 58.

40. *Kedushat Levi*, p. 345.

41. See M. Idel, “*Deus sive Natura*, the Metamorphosis of a Dictum from Maimonides to Spinoza,” in *Maimonides and the Sciences*, (eds.) S. Cohen and H. Levine (Dordrecht, 2000), pp. 87–110.

42. *Kedushat Levi*, p. 344. See also *Kedushat Levi*, p. 346, where he mentions in this context his teacher, R. Dov Baer of Medziretch. For another interesting example of the concept of the descent of the influx by means of letters, see the quote adduced from R. Hayyim Tirer of Chernovitz, in Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, p. 133. The concept surfaces much earlier as we find a similar stand in R. Nathan Neta` Shapira of Krakow, *Megalleh `Amuqot* (Jerusalem, 1981), fol. 12d, no. 50 (quoted also in the early-eighteenth-century R. Elijah ha-Kohen Ithamari, *Midrash Talpiyyot*, fol. 18d), and fol. 18b, no. 69.

43. *Kedushat Levi*, p. 348. See also the view in R. Aharon, *Toledot 'Aharon*, I, fol. 5c.

44. *Kedushat Levi*, p. 348.

45. See Idel, *Hasidism*, pp. 111–145, especially pp. 117–121, where the views of R. Levi Isaac reflecting this model are analyzed.

46. *Kedushat Levi*, p. 176; for another translation of this passage, see Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York, 1969), p. 5. Contemplation of the 'Ayin is a leitmotif of R. Levi Isaac of Berdichev's mysticism. For the history of this concept in Jewish mysticism, see Daniel Matt, "Ayin: The Concept of Nothingness in Jewish Mysticism," in *The Problem of Pure Consciousness, Mysticism and Philosophy*, (ed.) Robert K. C. Forman (New York, 1990), pp. 121–159.

47. R. Aharon, *Toledot 'Aharon*, I, fol. 6bc. See also R. Aharon, *Toledot 'Aharon*, II, fol. 30a, where the luminosity is related explicitly to 'Ein Sof and the Torah as written on a white fire. See also Idel, *Hasidism*, p. 160, especially for more on Cordovero's view of *Kavvanah*.

48. R. Aharon, *Toledot 'Aharon*, I, fol. 40ab. The presence of divine light within the letters of the Torah or prayer is a recurrent theme in hasidic literature since its inception. For more on this issue, see M. Idel, "From the 'Hidden Light' to the 'Light within the Torah': A Chapter in the Phenomenology of Jewish Mysticism" (Heb.), *On Light, Migvvan De`ot be-Yisrael*, Vol. 11 (2002), pp. 46–60.

49. R. Aharon, *Toledot 'Aharon*, II, fol. 47d. On the theme of bringing down the influx by an intense and enthusiastic study, see more sources translated and analyzed in Idel, *Hasidism*, pp. 182–185.

50. R. Aharon, *Toledot 'Aharon*, II, fol. 1a.

51. R. Aharon, *Toledot 'Aharon*, II, fol. 1a; see also II, fols. 36a–d.

52. R. Aharon, *Toledot 'Aharon*, I, fol. 27c.

53. See M. Idel, "Une figure d'homme au-dessus des sefirot (A propos de la doctrine des "eclats" de R. David ben Yehouda he-Hassid et ses développements)," trans. Charles Mopsik, *Pardes*, Vol. 8 (1988), pp. 131–150; and M. Idel, "Kabbalistic Material from R. David ben Yehudah he-Hasid's School" (Heb.), *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought*, Vol. 2 (1983), pp. 169–207.

54. See, e.g., R. Aharon, *Toledot 'Aharon*, I, fol. 21cd.

55. See Martin Buber, *The Origin and Meaning of Hasidism*, trans. Maurice Friedman (Atlantic Highlands, N.J., 1988), p. 124.

56. See Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, pp. 184–185.

57. Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago, 1981), pp. 344–345.

58. Derrida, *Dissemination*, pp. 344–345. For more on Abulafia and Derrida, see M. Idel, "Jacques Derrida et les sources kabbalistiques," in *Judéités: Questions pour Jacques Derrida*, ed. J. Cohen and R. Zagura-Orly (Paris, 2003), pp. 133–156.

59. Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, pp. 20, 80–110.

60. Umberto Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (Bloomington, 1984), pp. 155–157.

61. Umberto Eco, *Foucault's Pendulum*, trans. W. Weaver (San Diego, 1989), pp. 564–567.

62. Steiner, *After Babel*, p. 297. This view is hasidic too, but it is not related to R. Levi Isaac, and Steiner's understanding of his source deserves a separate discussion. See also Steiner, *After Babel*, p. 474.

63. Steiner, *After Babel*, p. 474; see also p. 65. On the possible rebellion of words, see also Gershom Scholem's letter to Franz Rosenzweig on the Hebrew

language. The affinity among this text by Steiner, its sources, and Scholem deserves another study.

64. See Moshe Idel, "George Steiner: A Prophet of Abstraction," *Modern Judaism*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (May 2005), pp. 120, 127n39.

65. See Idel, "George Steiner," pp. 127–130. See also M. Idel, "Hieroglyphs, Keys, Enigmas: On G. G. Scholem's Vision of Kabbalah: Between Franz Molitor and Franz Kafka," in *Arche Noah, Die Idee der <Kultur> im deutsch-juedischen Diskurs*, (ed.) B. Greiner and Ch. Schmidt (Freiburg, 2002), pp. 241–242.

66. See Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, pp. 283–289. See also M. Idel, "'Deferred Lives'—Something about the Configuration of Scholemian Kabbalah Research" (Heb.), *Daat*, Vols. 50–52 (2003), pp. 483–498.

67. See, e.g., John Hollander, ed., *Poetics of Influence* (New Haven, 1988). For the possible impact of Scholem's discussion on the white letters on one of Bloom's formulations, see Harold Bloom, *Kabbalah and Criticism* (New York, 1984), pp. 53–54.

68. For the concept of "strong readers" and misinterpretation in general, see Bloom, *Kabbalah and Criticism*, pp. 125–126. For "strong readers" in Jewish mysticism, see Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*.