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# I

## What Is Jewish Mysticism?

Mysticism is the process of striving for an intense relationship with God, sometimes going so far as to achieve an altered state. This striving has the effect of adding energy and intensity to religious life. Hence, mysticism has been defined by Bernard McGinn as “the ongoing search for a heightened consciousness, or awareness, of the presence of the living God—the God who makes a difference not only in what believers think, but also in how they struggle to live.”<sup>1</sup>

A key word here is “search”; mystical experience does not usually come without effort, and it often requires using certain techniques as well as acquiring knowledge. Another important idea here is “presence.” Those with a much more abstract notion of God, a God who does not address the personal situations of individuals, are likely to assume that the mystical quest is impossible or irrelevant. If this is your understanding of God, I hope you will suspend that for the time being and imagine what it would be like to believe in and even experience a different type of God. Imagine sensing that, as the Prophet Isaiah saw it, “the whole world is filled with His glory.”<sup>2</sup> Imagine that all we need to have this experience, to bridge the gap between God and human beings, is to refine our senses, acquire some knowledge and techniques, and sharpen our ethical sensitivities.

The mystic search for some form of union with the Divine is described by the twentieth-century theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel:

The universe, exposed to the violence of our analytical mind, is being broken apart. It is split into the known and unknown, into the seen and unseen. In mystic contemplation all things are seen as one. The mystic mind tends to hold the world together: to behold the seen in conjunction with the unseen, to keep the fellowship with the unknown through the revolving door of the known, “to learn the higher supernatural wisdom from all” that the Lord has created and to regain the knowledge that once was in the possession of men and “that has perished from them.” (Heschel, *Mystical Element in Judaism*, 603)<sup>3</sup>

Many would consider this goal extremely dangerous. To mention one obvious concern, what would result from “union with God”? Could one possibly return from it? We will encounter ample evidence of such concerns throughout this book. Nonetheless Heschel insists that the mystical experience is the pinnacle of religion, revealing a truth beyond words, beyond what is visible to us.

**The power of expression is not the monopoly of man. Expression and communication are, to some degree, something of which animals are capable. What characterizes man is not only his ability to develop words and symbols, but also his being compelled to draw a distinction between the utterable and the unutterable, to be stunned by that which is, but cannot be put into words. . . .**

**What smites us with unquenchable amazement is not that which we grasp and are able to convey but that which lies within our reach but beyond our grasp; not the quantitative aspect of nature but something qualitative; not what is beyond our range in time and space but the true meaning, source and end of being, in other words, the ineffable. (Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone*, 4-5)**

There will be a good deal on this subject that is difficult, if not impossible, to convey; this remains one of the chief challenges, even when the experienced mystic endeavors to tell us about the mystical experience.

Nonetheless, the one who believes in a truth beyond what is visible will likely understand the world differently from others, and may, like many Jewish mystics, seek the tools that will help him or her interpret that truth.

While there are common experiences among all mystics, they pursue and convey the experience in terms consistent with their own religious traditions. There is no such thing as a “generic” mysticism, and Jewish mystics do not suddenly have visions focused on the cross or hear the voice of Mohammed. Jewish mysticism involves Jewish rituals and symbols.<sup>4</sup>

Does this limit Jewish mystical experience? For instance, since the Torah tells us that we cannot “see” God, would the visual aspect of mystical experience be less frequent for Jews? We will see that the visual is not only a common theme, but in some periods one of the most frequent.<sup>5</sup>

While Jewish mystics seemed to oppose what passed for normative Judaism in various eras, they firmly believed that their goals and experiences represented the most essential part of Judaism; they did not reject Rabbinic Judaism, but saw themselves and their practices as its fulfillment. The early Jewish mystics did not even have a concept such as “mysticism” and never thought their experiences so abnormal as to require a special term. Indeed Hebrew has no word for the mystical experience.<sup>6</sup>

The texts in this book, taken from different eras, illustrate five different categories of Jewish mysticism. We will see later what techniques each of these types employs to achieve its goals, as well as how they work and more about how they developed.<sup>7</sup>

### **Normal Mysticism**

Ongoing Jewish activity maintains awareness of God’s Presence, without any sort of paranormal activity. In mindfully fulfilling a precept or reciting a brief prayer, one consciously and simply acknowledges that Presence. Normal Mysticism turns common events like these into moments for a brief recognition of God. By creating such occasions, “an awareness of

God seeps into all the activities of human life until this unseen Presence is taken as the true foundation of being.”<sup>8</sup> Jewish life offers continual ritual opportunities that can stimulate such awareness when they are carried out with proper intention. Such an experience involves no great intensity and indeed no such intensity is desirable for the average Jew. Anything beyond Normal Mysticism is intended only for an elite.

### ***Deveikut*, “Cleaving” to God**

The root of the word *deveikut* appears in Gen. 2:24: “Hence a man leaves his father and mother *v’davak b’ishto*, and cleaves to his wife, so they become one flesh.” This suggests for the mystic an intimate closeness with God. For some mystics, the ultimate religious experience is this intense sense of closeness with God, a radically transformative experience that involves a sweeping attempt to eliminate the gap between God and man. Complete *deveikut* may exist in intimate communion, or even union or reunion. The goal is to maintain intense intimacy as much as possible, and for the mystic who desires it the purpose of Jewish practice is to foster it.

Teacher and storyteller Yitzhak Buxbaum gives an excellent illustration of how this should work in daily life: “Consider what a person does when driving a car. He can turn the radio channel with one hand, adjust the speed with his foot, and, at the same time, carry on a conversation with a friend in the front seat; but all the while, his attention is firmly fixed on the road to see that he stays in his lane, and his second hand is on the wheel to steer the car. That is a matter of life and death. So can you do the things you have to do in the world while the greater part of your attention is fastened on God.”<sup>9</sup>

### **Mainline Kabbalah**

The basic teaching of this form of Jewish mysticism is that what we do can affect God’s inner life, and that by doing so we make a great difference for all life. This teaching is sometimes described as “theosophical,” which means: having to do with mystical insights into the nature of God.<sup>10</sup> As

Heschel taught: “This is the pattern of Jewish mysticism: to have an open heart for the inner life of God. It is based on two assumptions: that there is an inner life in God, and that the existence of man ought to revolve in a spiritual dynamic course around the life of God.”<sup>11</sup>

It may seem strange to suggest we could have such knowledge of God’s inner life, but much of the Jewish mystical tradition is based on this assumption. Mainline Kabbalah is also sometimes described as “theurgical,” relating to the mystic’s beneficent involvement in God’s inner life, in order to accomplish goals on that level (which may incidentally benefit this world).<sup>12</sup> Several chapters in this volume are devoted to the terminology Kabbalah uses in explaining what these goals are and how the mystic achieves them.

### **Affective Kabbalah**

Affective Kabbalah is related to Mainline Kabbalah, but with one important difference. Action in this world still stimulates action in a higher world, but here the action is for human benefit, not for God’s sake. This is human-centered mysticism, meant to address communal or personal needs. Jewish magic falls into this category, as it seeks to draw down and channel the divine powers toward certain goals. Specific deeds, holy or otherwise, promote or obstruct the divine flow that sustains our world. Frequently in this form of mysticism emphasis is placed on the role of the tzaddik, the spiritual master who is able to maintain a relationship with God, serve as a channel for divine grace, and improve conditions for us.<sup>13</sup>

### **Prophetic, or Ecstatic, Kabbalah**

Here, the highest goal is to achieve some form of union with God, but in a way that will enable an individual to reach the peak of his spiritual potential, achieve revelation through mystical experience, and even attain a level of prophecy. This level of enlightenment is a different kind of intimacy with God; it has additional purposes, such as learning the secrets of the Torah and God’s decrees for the future, the prayers of the angels, and other supernatural knowledge.

## The Historical Development of Jewish Mysticism

This book traces the history of the five types of Jewish mysticism described above as they manifest in several different categories over the last two thousand-plus years:

1. Mysticism in the Bible, both before and after the Second Temple, is addressed in chapter 2.
2. The Rabbinic period (first to eighth century CE), including not only the mainstream Rabbinic literature such as the Talmud and Midrash but also a variety of texts dealing with mystical experience, is covered in chapters 3 through 6.
3. Hasidei Ashkenaz (German pietists, eleventh to thirteenth century) and their form of mystical moralism are examined in chapter 7.
4. Early Kabbalah (twelfth to fifteenth century), the development of its main ideas in the Zohar, and the alternate path of Abulafia are covered in most of chapters 8 through 15.
5. Lurianic Kabbalah (sixteenth to seventeenth century), which was centered in the mystical community of Safed and greatly expanded upon existing kabbalistic practices, is the focus of chapters 16 through 18. (Chapters 19 through 22 examine specific concepts within Jewish mysticism and how they were interpreted during different periods.)
6. Hasidism (eighteenth century to the present) is the great revivalist movement founded in Eastern Europe that brought a kabbalistic view and practice to a much larger group of Jews than ever before. Selected Hasidic thinkers and ideas can be found in chapters 23 through 26, and three twentieth-century mystics are discussed in chapter 27.
7. What lies beyond the present? How did we get to the Judaism of today, and how might Jewish mysticism affect the Judaism of the future? These questions are dealt with directly in chapter 28 and indirectly in a number of other chapters.

This is not a guidebook for experiencing Jewish mystical heights, but it will give you a sense of what such experiences are like through the descriptions and teachings of those who claim to have had them. You will develop a sense for the impact of the mystical impulse on all aspects of Jewish life and why so many Jews in diverse times and places saw it as the central force and purpose of Judaism. And you will also understand the challenge it posed to Jewish leaders as it developed different forms. Finally, you will appreciate the joys and ecstasies—and also the potential dangers—experienced by those who pursued Jewish mystical experiences.

## 2

## Mysticism in the Bible

The Hebrew Bible describes many meetings between God and human beings. We see the exceptional access granted to Moses and the Patriarchs. The prophets are given messages to transmit, and occasionally intense visions. Psalms frequently speak of the longing to experience and to dwell in God's Presence. When examining the mystical experiences recorded in the Bible, it is important to see not only the quality of these experiences but how they were understood in succeeding generations. Later mystics were inspired particularly by two visions, one of Isaiah and the other of Ezekiel.

Isaiah lived in the eighth century BCE; here he describes God's throne room, a divine parallel to the earthly Temple in Jerusalem.

**In the year that King Uzziah died, I beheld my Lord seated on a high and lofty throne; and the skirts of His robe filled the Temple. Seraphs stood in attendance on Him. Each of them had six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his legs, and with two he would fly. And one would call to the other, "Holy, holy, holy! The Lord of Hosts! His presence fills all the earth!"**

**The doorposts would shake at the sound of the one who called, and the House kept filling with smoke. I cried, "Woe is me; I am lost! For I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my own eyes have beheld the King Lord of Hosts." Then**

**one of the seraphs flew over to me with a live coal, which he had taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. He touched it to my lips and declared, “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt shall depart and your sin be purged away.”**

**Then I heard the voice of my Lord saying, “Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I; send me.” And He said, “Go, say to that people: ‘Hear, indeed, but do not understand; see, indeed, but do not grasp.’” (Isa. 6:1-9)**

The mystical experience described here is not just about the message God gives the prophet; it's also about the prophet's reaction. By assigning this Isaiah passage as the haftarah to be read with the Torah reading (in Exodus 20) about God giving the Ten Commandments, the Rabbis made clear that they saw Isaiah's individual mystical experience of revelation as parallel to what the Israelites experienced at Sinai.

The opening verse suggests that Isaiah is within the temple courts. He suddenly has an ecstatic vision of God, similar to other biblical scenes of God's throne (such as in 1 Kings 22:19-23 and Dan. 7:9-14). A form of the word “fill” (*malei*) is repeated three times in the first four verses, emphasizing the overwhelming Presence of God.<sup>1</sup> Angelic beings pay tribute to God, and Isaiah has an overpowering sense of his own impurity in this holy realm; one of the angels brings him a purifying coal, after which he is able to withstand the moment and bring a message from the higher realm to his people. Isaiah does not seem to have done anything to prepare for this experience; it is simply granted to him—or, more accurately, forced upon him. He does go up to the Temple in Jerusalem, but he is clearly raised up to a higher court.<sup>2</sup> This is the mystical experience of the prophet; its goal is simply to prepare him to receive and transmit God's word.

What do the angels mean when they say that God's Presence (*Kavod*; sometimes translated as “glory”) fills all the earth? What is this *Kavod*? It seems to be a visible manifestation of God's glory.<sup>3</sup> If you are troubled by

such anthropomorphisms (the attribution of human form or behavior to God), you are in good company; Maimonides and other medieval philosophers wrestled with this as well.<sup>4</sup> We will see many other such expressions here and later, because they are common in mystical expression.

Now we turn to Ezekiel, who was carried from Jerusalem into exile in Babylonia, where he experiences this astonishing, even bizarre revelation:

**In the thirtieth year, on the fifth day of the fourth month, when I was in the community of exiles by the Chebar Canal, the heavens opened and I saw visions of God. On the fifth day of the month—it was the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin—the word of the Lord came to the priest Ezekiel son of Buzi, by the Chebar Canal, in the land of the Chaldeans. And the hand of the Lord came upon him there.**

I looked, and lo, a stormy wind came sweeping out of the north—a huge cloud and flashing fire, surrounded by a radiance; and in the center of it, in the center of the fire, a gleam as of amber. In the center of it were also the figures of four creatures. . . . Each had four faces, and each of them had four wings; the legs of each were [fused into] a single rigid leg, and the feet of each were like a single calf's hoof; and their sparkle was like the luster of burnished bronze. They had human hands below their wings. The four of them had their faces and their wings on their four sides. . . .

Each of them had a human face [at the front]; each of the four had the face of a lion on the right; each of the four had the face of an ox on the left; and each of the four had the face of an eagle [at the back]. Such were their faces. As for their wings, they were separated: above, each had two touching those of the others, while the other two covered its body. And each could move in the direction of any of its faces; they went wherever the spirit impelled them to go, without turning when they moved.

. . . With them was something that looked like burning coals of fire. This fire, suggestive of torches, kept moving about among the creatures; the fire had a radiance, and lightning issued from the fire. Dashing to and fro [among] the creatures was something that looked like flares.

. . . As for the appearance and structure of the wheels, they gleamed like beryl. All four had the same form; the appearance and structure of each was as of two wheels cutting through each other. And when they moved, each could move in the direction of any of its four quarters; they did not veer when they moved. Their rims were tall and frightening, for the rims of all four were covered all over with eyes. And when the creatures moved forward, the wheels moved at their sides; and when the creatures were borne above the earth, the wheels were borne too. Wherever the spirit impelled them to go, they went—wherever the spirit impelled them—and the wheels were borne alongside them; for the spirit of the creatures was in the wheels. . . .

Above the heads of the creatures was a form: an expanse, with an awe-inspiring gleam as of crystal, was spread out above their heads. . . .

Above the expanse over their heads was the semblance of a throne, in appearance like sapphire; and on top, upon this semblance of a throne, there was the semblance of a human form. From what appeared as his loins up, I saw a gleam as of amber, what looked like a fire encased in a frame; and from what appeared as his loins down, I saw what looked like fire. There was a radiance all about him. . . . That was the appearance of the semblance of the Presence of the Lord. When I beheld it, I flung myself down on my face. And I heard the voice of someone speaking. And He said to me, “O mortal, stand up on your feet that I may speak to you.” As He spoke to me, a spirit entered into me and set me upon my feet; and I heard what was being spoken to me. He said to me, “O mortal, I am sending you to the people of Israel, that nation of rebels, who have rebelled against Me. They as well as their fathers have defied Me to this very day; for

**the sons are brazen of face and stubborn of heart. I send you to them, and you shall say to them: ‘Thus said the Lord God’—whether they listen or not, for they are a rebellious breed—that they may know that there was a prophet among them.”**

**... Then a spirit carried me away, and behind me I heard a great roaring sound: “Blessed is the Presence of the Lord, in His place.” (Ezek. 1:1-2:5, 3:12)**

This prophetic vision is not only outside the Temple; it is outside the Land of Israel entirely. However, it is the vision of a *Kohen*, a priest who almost certainly participated in the temple service. And much of its imagery is based on different aspects of the Temple: the cherubim (creatures part human and part animal), the Ark of the Covenant below them, and the Holy of Holies containing them (as per Exodus 25 and 37). However, by virtue of the fact that this mystical experience takes place in exile, it suggests that intense experience of God’s nearness need not be limited to the Land of Israel. It is the most detailed and puzzling of all the biblical visions of God, or His *Kavod*, including not only the divine throne but also a heavenly chariot, or *Merkavah*. (Though this word does not appear in the text, the experience of Ezekiel is often referred to as “seeing the *Merkavah*.”) So mysterious and confusing did the Rabbis find this text that many would not allow it to be included as one of the public readings (*haftarot*) from the books of the Prophets. Ultimately it did become the standard haftarah for the first day of Shavuot, when the Ten Commandments are read from the Torah.<sup>5</sup>

What does one make of Ezekiel’s experience? Here are interpretations of some portions of this challenging text:

1. The number four is significant: there are four creatures, each with four faces and four wings. These correspond to the four cherubim surrounding the Ark,<sup>6</sup> and the four horns of the temple altar (see Exod. 27:2). These may represent the four directions, with God’s Presence at the center of the universe (i.e., in the Temple). Thus

these sets of four evoke a special sense of closeness to the Divine.<sup>7</sup> Finally, the four wheels are able to move in all four directions. What is the “spirit” (*ruah*) propelling these creatures?

2. The Hebrew makes frequent use of the word *demut*, often translated as “likeness,” as in Gen. 1:26: “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.” What is a “likeness”? It appears to be something, but actually is not. Thus, this account of Ezekiel claims to see things as they appear to be, while recognizing that they may actually be something different. This is one of the frequent themes in Jewish mysticism: that which appears to be is not necessarily real. Similarly, the word “like” is frequently used in one form or another, suggesting that the description is necessarily inexact.
3. Something that looked like flares approached the throne, then dashed away. Perhaps these beings sought closeness with the divine power and then became frightened, quickly backing off. This is similar to the experience of the Israelites who came to Sinai but were afraid to approach, leaving Moses to go forward alone to receive God’s revelation.
4. In the English translation the throne appears “like sapphire.” (Actually, the modern form of sapphire was unknown in the ancient Near East, and this *sappir* refers to the deep blue lapis lazuli.)<sup>8</sup> Discussion of the next text will delve into this more. Perhaps the author wished to suggest that God shines like precious stones.<sup>9</sup>
5. Ezekiel’s vision of the “semblance” of the *Kavod*, the Divine Presence, is so powerful that he feels compelled to prostrate himself. This would have been a natural reaction for a *Kohen* who served reverently in the temple precincts and knew of the prostrations that took place in the Holy of Holies. But it is at this point that the vision gives way to the words.<sup>10</sup> “Seeing God” is not the point of the journey.
6. Finally, just as Isaiah’s divine court spoke of God’s holiness,

Ezekiel hears a roaring sound: “Blessed is the Presence of the Lord, in His place” (*Barukh k’vod Adonai mimkomo*). This phrase also became part of daily prayer, in the core of the “Kedushah.” Its meaning is unclear, but Plaut suggests “it is best to see it as a parallel to Ps. 135:21, which has a similar phrase: “Praised be the Eternal from Zion,” meaning, “God is praised by those who are in Zion.” For Zion is God’s place, and—says Ezekiel—when the exiles will return to it, God’s Presence will once more be praised *from its place*.”<sup>11</sup> Ezekiel is outside of the Land of Israel, but the point is not clear: does the vision intend to suggest that God reveals himself in foreign lands or that God is associated only with the Holy Land?<sup>12</sup>

Why were the prayer of the angels in Isaiah and the closing line from Ezekiel adapted into the “Kedushah” of the daily service? Perhaps its creators believed that some vision of God’s Presence, or at least a sense of that Presence, was or ought to be available to every Jew. Alternatively, the liturgists may have wanted to emphasize the importance of this mystical experience, even if most Jews would not experience it.

All in all, the prophet’s remarkable experience serves to prepare him (as it did Isaiah) for the task of prophecy. We shall shortly see another example of this.

Since Moses was considered the greatest of the prophets, we would expect to find that he has extraordinary encounters with God, and we will examine a few.

**Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy elders of Israel ascended; and they saw the God of Israel: under His feet there was the likeness of a pavement of sapphire, like the very sky for purity. Yet He did not raise His hand against the leaders of the Israelites; they beheld God, and they ate and drank. (Exod. 24:9–11)**

Here, a substantial group of Israelites ascend and “see” the God of Israel, complete with “feet” on the likeness of a pavement of lapis lazuli, which seems to be the foundation of the throne of God.<sup>13</sup> Ancient Ugaritic literature mentions the decorative use of this element within a palace, and it may have been natural for the biblical author and characters to imagine God’s throne as contained within a palace.<sup>14</sup> The deep blue also would be appropriate imagery for human beings looking up at the sky, the “throne” of God. “By focusing on what was *under His feet*, it seems to suggest that the leaders did not see God directly but from below, through a transparent . . . colored pavement.”<sup>15</sup>

How is this to be interpreted? Most traditional authorities do not take it at face value. One suggestion was that the experience of God substituted for eating and drinking, as was the case for Moses during his forty days on Sinai.<sup>16</sup> Maimonides held that the experience of Moses and the elders was an intellectual perception of God, not a sensory experience.<sup>17</sup> Abraham ibn Ezra understood it as part of a prophetic vision like those of Isaiah and Ezekiel.<sup>18</sup> But the text literally does say that the people *saw* God.

**Now Moses, tending the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian, drove the flock into the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a blazing fire out of a bush. He gazed, and there was a bush all aflame, yet the bush was not consumed. Moses said, “I must turn aside to look at this marvelous sight; why doesn’t the bush burn up?” When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to look, God called to him out of the bush: “Moses! Moses!” He answered, “Here I am.” And He said, “Do not come closer. Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you stand is holy ground. I am,” He said, “the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. (Exod. 3:1–6)**

Initially, Moses is unaware that any holiness is attached to this place. (Recall the experience of Jacob: “Surely God is present in this place and I, I did not know”; Gen. 28:16, where the notion of sanctified space first appears.)<sup>19</sup> But when Moses sees that the bush is not consumed by the fire, his attention is aroused. Initially, the text says: “An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a blazing fire”; why would God appear in fire? As Jeffrey Tigay notes, fire evokes the Divine “because it is insubstantial yet powerful, dangerous, illuminating, and purifying.”<sup>20</sup>

Moses is told to remove his shoes, which indicated respect and humility in that time and place. This is a significant aspect of Muslim worship, and traditional synagogues also retain a remnant of this practice in the ceremony performed by the *kohanim* when they remove their shoes to bless the congregation during the festival *Musaf* service (and, in Israel, at the daily morning service).

What does Moses do when he realizes God is speaking to him? He hides his face. He is afraid to look. This may seem to be a natural reaction, but the point is that *there is something to look at*. Some of us might take such passages as metaphors, but would we really be so afraid of a metaphor? And the previous text suggests that under certain circumstances not only can people see God, but they need not be afraid of doing so.

**The Lord would speak to Moses face to face, as one man speaks to another. And he would then return to the camp; but his attendant, Joshua son of Nun, a youth, would not stir out of the Tent.**

Moses said to the Lord, “See, You say to me, ‘Lead this people forward,’ but You have not made known to me whom You will send with me. Further, You have said, ‘I have singled you out by name, and you have, indeed, gained My favor.’ Now, if I have truly gained Your favor, pray let me know Your ways, that I may know You and continue in Your favor. Consider, too, that this nation is Your people.” And He said, “I will go in the lead and will lighten your burden.” And he said

to Him, “Unless You go in the lead, do not make us leave this place. For how shall it be known that Your people have gained Your favor unless You go with us, so that we may be distinguished, Your people and I, from every people on the face of the earth?”

And the Lord said to Moses, “I will also do this thing that you have asked; for you have truly gained My favor and I have singled you out by name.” He said, “Oh, let me behold Your Presence!” And He answered, “I will make all My goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim before you the name Lord, and the grace that I grant and the compassion that I show. But,” He said, “you cannot see My face, for man may not see Me and live.” And the Lord said, “See, there is a place near Me. Station yourself on the rock and, as My Presence passes by, I will put you in a cleft of the rock and shield you with My hand until I have passed by. Then I will take My hand away and you will see My back; but My face must not be seen.” (Exod. 33:11-23)

Moses asks to be shown God’s *Kavod*, God’s Presence. We have seen that this may refer to some kind of physical manifestation of God, and that is the apparent meaning here. Moses, now much more accustomed to God than he was at the burning bush and already privileged with “face-to-face” communication (and we might well ask about what *this* means!), wants to have a visual experience, a more intense knowledge of God. Normally, the visible *Kavod* is a group experience, at a time and place chosen by God, and somewhat distant from those observing.<sup>21</sup> Moses asks for an exception. God tells him: I’ll give you part of what you desire, but no individual may have all of it. Actually seeing God would be too powerful an experience for any individual; even Moses cannot prepare adequately for it. God provides a screen (“I will . . . shield you with My hand”) and shows Moses His “back” . . . perhaps, as Nahum Sarna suggests, “the traces of His presence, the afterglow of His supernatural effulgence.”<sup>22</sup> But even though Moses is not entitled to see the *Kavod*, the text does not deny that such a visible form exists.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, as

Moshe Weinfeld has proposed, the warning about the danger of seeing God usually affirms the possibility of such an experience!<sup>24</sup>

But what exactly is this *Kavod*, the Presence? In the thirteenth century Nahmanides (Ramban, Rabbi Moshe ben Nahman) suggests that Moses wanted to see the visible Divine Presence through a clear speculum (a mirror or prism). This refers to a Rabbinic teaching suggesting that “all the prophets saw [God] through an unclear glass . . . but Moses saw through a clear glass.”<sup>25</sup> In other words, Moses had the most perfect, direct “view” of God possible, even though it could not be complete. Nahmanides’s view of the text is emphatically not metaphorical, unlike those mentioned on Exodus 24 above. As we shall see, this is consistent with the views of many other Jewish mystics.<sup>26</sup>

Among the other books of Scripture, Daniel is also filled with visionary experiences. Although the book of Daniel is set in the early exilic period—sixth century BCE—scholars regard it as a product of the period leading into the Maccabean Wars of the second century BCE.

**In the third year of King Cyrus of Persia, an oracle was revealed to Daniel, who was called Belteshazzar. That oracle was true, but it was a great task to understand the prophecy; understanding came to him through the vision.**

**At that time, I, Daniel, kept three full weeks of mourning. I ate no tasty food, nor did any meat or wine enter my mouth. I did not anoint myself until the three weeks were over. It was on the twenty-fourth day of the first month, when I was on the bank of the great river Tigris, that I looked and saw a man dressed in linen, his loins girt in fine gold. His body was like beryl, his face had the appearance of lightning, his eyes were like flaming torches, his arms and legs had the color of burnished bronze, and the sound of his speech was like the noise of a multitude.**

**I, Daniel, alone saw the vision; the men who were with me did not see the vision, yet they were seized with a great terror and fled into hiding. So I was left alone to see this great vision. I was drained**

of strength, my vigor was destroyed, and I could not summon up strength. I heard him speaking; and when I heard him speaking, overcome by a deep sleep, I lay prostrate on the ground. Then a hand touched me, and shook me onto my hands and knees. He said to me, “O Daniel, precious man, mark what I say to you and stand up, for I have been sent to you.” After he said this to me, I stood up, trembling. He then said to me, “Have no fear, Daniel, for from the first day that you set your mind to get understanding, practicing abstinence before your God, your prayer was heard, and I have come because of your prayer. However, the prince of the Persian kingdom opposed me for twenty-one days; now Michael, a prince of the first rank, has come to my aid, after I was detained there with the kings of Persia. So I have come to make you understand what is to befall your people in the days to come, for there is yet a vision for those days.” (Dan. 10:1-14)

This vision includes a heavenly being who shares some characteristics of the being in Ezekiel, but is not presumed to be God Himself. Receipt of this vision required extensive preparation by Daniel. While it offers him the understanding that he had requested, it certainly is not as direct an experience of the Divine as occurs in the Isaiah and Ezekiel texts.

But it is still physically draining, creating a markedly different and intense “state” for Daniel. Jewish mystics later invented a term for this state in which one is prepared to receive divine messages: *mohin d’gadlut*, or “higher consciousness.”

The book of Psalms, the collection of devotional hymns, also contains examples of anonymous authors who sought intimate contact with God.

**Protect me, O God, for I seek refuge in You.**

**I say to the Lord: “You are my Lord, my  
benefactor; there is none above You.”**

**As to the holy and mighty ones that are in the land,  
my whole desire concerning them is that those who  
espouse another [god] may have many sorrows!**

**I will have no part of their bloody libations;  
their names will not pass my lips.  
The Lord is my allotted share and portion; You control my fate.  
Delightful country has fallen to my lot;  
lovely indeed is my estate.  
I bless the Lord who has guided me; my  
conscience admonishes me at night.  
I am ever mindful of the Lord's presence; He is at  
my right hand, I shall never be shaken.  
So my heart rejoices, my whole being exults,  
and my body rests secure.  
For You will not abandon me to Sheol, or  
let Your faithful one see the Pit.  
You will teach me the path of life. In Your presence is perfect  
joy; delights are ever in Your right hand. (Ps. 16)**

What is meant by “I am ever mindful of the Lord’s Presence,” or, more literally, “I have always set the Lord before me”? The Psalmist could be saying he consistently follows God’s guidance, and since he does the right thing, he has faith he will not be abandoned. Or, he could mean: I constantly focus on God’s Presence, and that is what gives me security and joy.<sup>27</sup> Many Jewish mystics chose to read the psalm this way, and made it their business always to “set God” before them. Many synagogues (and some individual Jewish homes) contain a plaque that serves as a meditative device, called a *shiviti* (the Hebrew word for “I have set” or “I am mindful”), containing the Four-Letter Name from this verse—so that one literally sets God’s Name out as a visual focus.

The great twentieth-century scholar Gershom Scholem, who established the academic study of Jewish mysticism, rejected the idea of biblical mysticism. He believed that religion went through three stages: (1) pagan

faith, a mythical (prebiblical) epoch where people experienced the world as full of gods “whose presence can be experienced without recourse to ecstatic meditation”; (2) the period when institutional religion arises (for Jews, the biblical period) and God and man are separated by a gulf “which can be crossed by nothing but the *voice*; the voice of God, directing and law-giving in His revelation, and the voice of man in prayer”; (3) the romantic period of established religion (for Jews, the Rabbinic era), where mysticism begins to develop in order to overcome the abyss through direct experience of God.<sup>28</sup>

Even though Scholem’s scheme of three developmental stages of religion still carries some weight in the field, his assumptions are widely questioned. It is logical to include these biblical experiences as mystical because the impulse behind them has so much in common with what follows. And we shall see many of the same elements, particularly altered states and visions of God, in the earliest forms of Jewish mysticism that follow the time of the Hebrew Bible.